



Illegal immigrants face long odds to become legal citizens

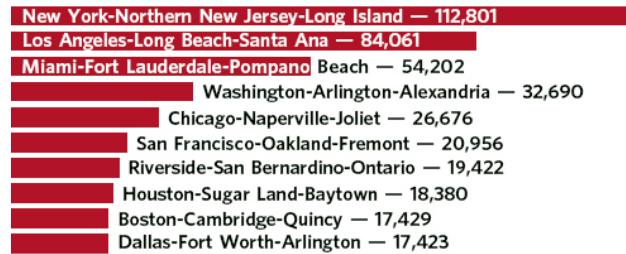
Josh Dulaney, Staff Writer

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FISCAL YEAR 2009

Top 10 naturalizations by region

Total persons naturalized in fiscal 2009 was **743,715**.



SOURCE: Department of Homeland Security

Emilio Amaya often hears a phrase uttered by those who oppose illegal immigration: Get in line.

But there's a problem.

"There is no line," said Amaya, director of the San Bernardino Community Service Center, an immigrant support group.

"That's the problem," Amaya said. "Some of the people that express those concerns don't know the process."

Immigrating legally to the U.S. and realizing the dream of citizenship became reality for some 743,715 people last year.

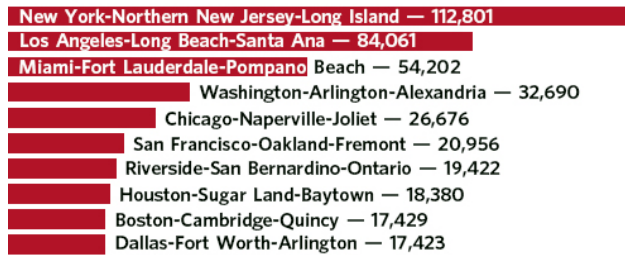
But for the vast majority of immigrants in the U. S. illegally, the chances of ever becoming citizens - or even legal residents - is largely a pipe dream.

"My answer is, there is nothing you can do," Amaya said he tells the dozens

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of undocumented immigrants that call him each week seeking a pathway to citizenship.

On Saturday, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services hosted a workshop at Sunrise Church in Rialto to help those interested in becoming naturalized citizens separate fact from fiction.

Those with a realistic chance include people over 18 who have either been legal permanent

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residents for five years or married to American citizens for three years.

The same is true for those in the military who meet certain requirements.

They must first file an N-400 form, the federal government's naturalization application, which costs \$675.

Successful applications are followed by interviews and tests on basic American civics.

Mariana Gitomer, spokeswoman for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, said the process takes about five months.

Gitomer is working to get the word out to permanent legal residents.

"If people would come to these sessions, we would give them information on naturalization and legalization," she said.

Art Lucero, a pastor at Sunrise Church, said the outreach is part of a decade-long effort to assist immigrants.

But that outreach also includes sharing the harsh reality with those who aren't legal residents. Often, people desperate for legal documentation are cheated out of their money by groups that promise help with legalization, he said.

"A number of them were asking for some kind of help because they had gone to notary publics in

Mexico, so they see that over here, and the ones that take advantage of a lot of these immigrants are Hispanics themselves," Lucero said.

Gustavo Vargas, a 22-year-old illegal immigrant who lives in Colton, said such workshops offer crucial information to people in his predicament.

Vargas came to the country with his older brother about nine years ago. While his brother married an American and became a U.S. citizen, Vargas has remained an undocumented immigrant.

He earns \$8 an hour at a food factory. Vargas dreams of someday becoming a U.S. citizen and finding work as a mechanic.

"We have more opportunities here to work," Vargas said. "Mexico there is not too many. I don't have nothing over there."

One policy analyst says that's the main reason why the flow of illegal immigration won't stop any time soon.

"As long as (opportunity) is here, there is likely to be a lot of illegal immigration," said Jeffrey A. Miron, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C.

Even laws such as Arizona's SB 1070, which requires police to determine the immigration status of people they stop if there is reasonable suspicion, is "wishful thinking," Miron said.

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Miron believes the country needs to work to expand legal immigration.

Miron favors a guest worker program that would be open to perhaps hundreds of thousands of immigrants each year.

"It's clearly not a panacea, but if a substantial number of Mexican workers can come here legally, that will reduce pressure off the system," he said.

Gitomer said there are few options for undocumented immigrants such as Vargas who are seeking permanent legal status.

"Typically, a person can become legal through a family member (legally in the U.S.) who petitions them or an employer who requests a work visa," Gitomer said.

There are barriers however.

Gitomer said work visas are generally for those with highly skilled jobs, and the waiting list is very long.

For those in the U.S. illegally, the State Department conducts a rigorous background check to determine how one arrived here before officials grant a petition, Gortimer said.

"There's no line," Gortimer said. "If they don't have that petition, they're out of luck."

Some say there's nothing wrong with that.

"So what?" said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies in Washington, D.C., "There are millions of people in Pakistan, Nigeria, Indonesia and Brazil for whom there is no line either. Just because there is no line, we're supposed to allow them to break the law?"

Krikorian describes his group as a pro-immigrant, low-immigration think tank which seeks fewer immigrants but a warmer welcome for those admitted.

He said a pro-immigrant policy would include more consumer friendly and efficient service from USCIS, which often is rife with stories about lost fingerprints and documents needed to process immigrants.

"The DMV isn't as unfriendly or inefficient as it used to be, and there's no reason USCIS should be either," he said.

The U.S. should more narrowly define who can immigrate, and then each year let in everybody who qualifies, he said.

As an example, instead of basing admission on familial relations, the U.S. should focus on highly skilled workers, Krikorian said.

"We are a 21st century post-industrial economy and most of the immigrants are 19th century-style workers."

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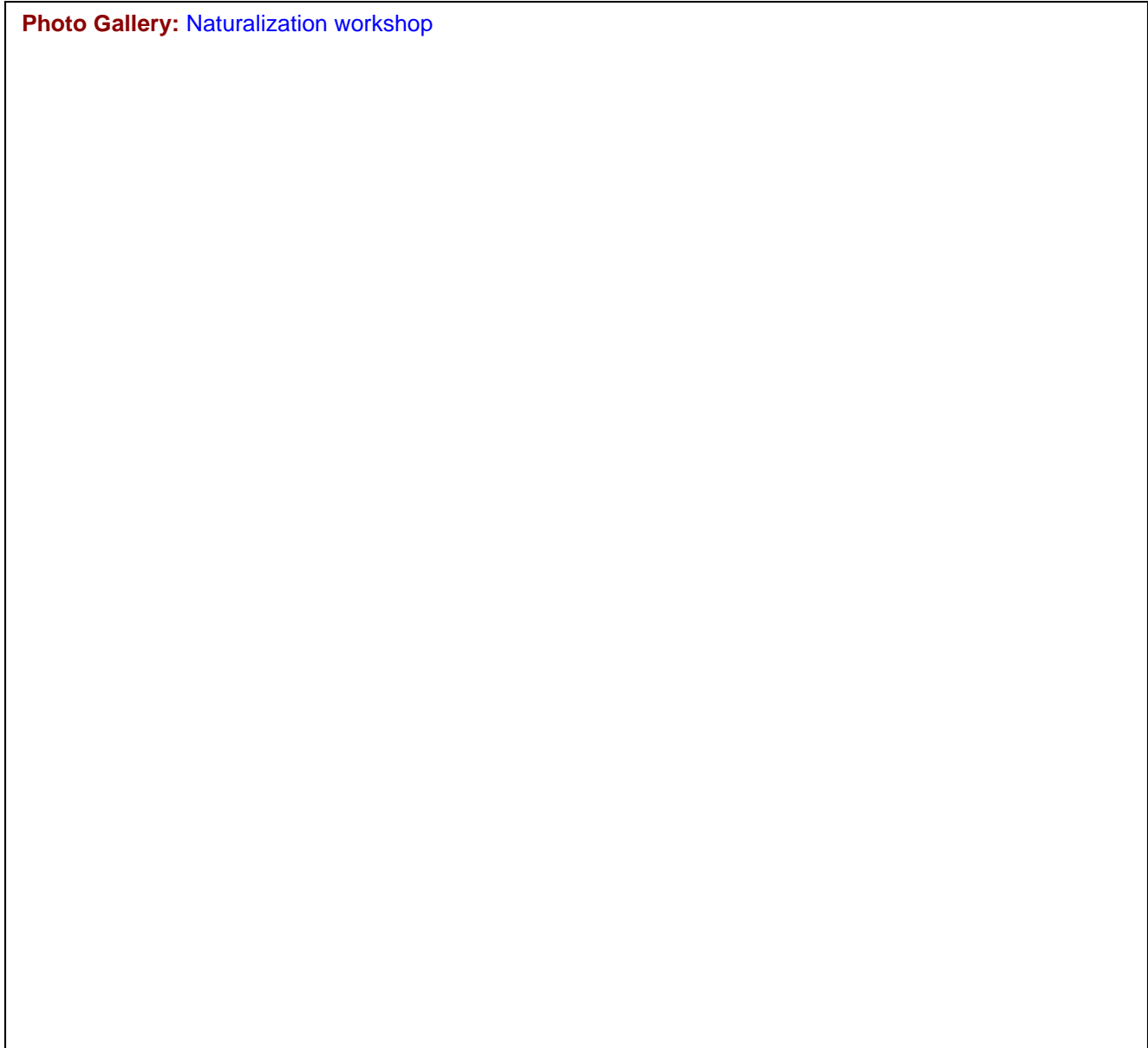
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