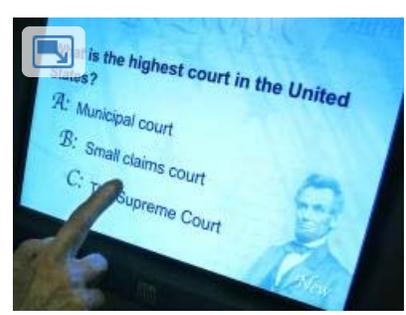


Citizenship process not as simple as many think

By Heidi Hall, The Tennessean Updated 19h 13m ago

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. -- The path to citizenship is not all that easy, advocates say, even if an immigrant has a helping hand.



By Carlos Osorio, AP

A citizenship test kiosk.

Celina Alvarez, a Franklin, Tenn., resident who moved to the United States 18 years ago from Jalisco, Mexico, spent \$18,000 in application and attorney fees just to get a green card. And her employer -- she takes orders for a local fan company -- sponsored her and her husband.

"People say, 'Why don't you just go get (citizenship)?' " she said. "It's very difficult, and it's not easy to get help." Her husband still doesn't feel ready to move forward.

It costs \$680 for the naturalization application, which green card holders can do after five years, three if they're married to a U.S. citizen. Applicants also have to spend thousands more on lawyers and trips to Memphis, where the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services office that serves Tennessee and parts of Arkansas and

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"I'll have more opportunities. I'll be able to vote," said Alvarez, who has two children who were born here. "My son is really pressuring me to have it by the next election."

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But filing the application doesn't guarantee acceptance.

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First, the federal government has a limit on the number of potential citizens from each country. Then after

applicants file, they must stay in the U.S. until their interview, in which they answer 10 questions about American history and government, prove they can understand and write English, and clarify points on their applications.

Maria Evans of Clarksville, Tenn., was lucky.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services officials had 40 interviews Tuesday at a Nashville public library to help applicants cut down on the trips to Memphis. Evans had gone through seven years of lawyers, paperwork and studying to get to her interview.

Her husband, Robert, a native-born American citizen, sat by her side for moral support.

"In banking, I've realized the importance of becoming a citizen to get a specific position," she said in perfect English, using grammar she started learning in Mexico. "It has been a barrier."

Maria Evans passed her interview and soon she'll find out when she can be sworn in as a citizen.

When typical native-born Americans think about immigrants, they think about [Latin American](#) farm workers or nannies, said Flavia Jimenez, director of integration policy for the nonprofit [National Immigration Forum](#). They also think naturalization is a simple process.

"That plays into our ineffective policy on immigration," she said. "It doesn't paint a clear picture of who we are as a nation. There are a lot of myths about who the immigrants are, the face of the immigrant community."

The largest number of naturalized citizens in Tennessee came from India in 2010, the most recent year for detailed [U.S. Department of Homeland Security](#) data. Mexico was second, and Egypt third. Most were in professional or management careers.

A Nashville-based nonprofit, the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition, has workshops, offers free legal advice and can help with application fee waivers to aid legal permanent residents move into citizenship.

Anahi Gutierrez, who coordinates workshops for the group, was expecting 40 people at the one she had April 1, was prepared for 60 but was overwhelmed by 120. It demonstrates how much people want to be Americans, she said.

"You can't deny that, if they are citizens or not, America is made up of people who came from all across the world," Gutierrez said. "The only way to have this reflected in the policies is to have them become civically engaged."

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Mari Kay Whitney · ★Top Commenter

Achieving the treasure that is American citizenship should not BE easy.

Reply · 5 · Like · Follow Post · 18 hours ago



Bill Hart · ★Top Commenter

But mari Kay, it should be doable and that is the problem with the system now. NO WAY can all the illegals now in the US can get citizenship with system we have in place. There are some truth and logic to Richard Bunce's comments.

Reply · Like · 18 hours ago



Dale Mark · ★Top Commenter · Works at Barclay long haul

Bill I have some issues with illegal aliens being given amnesty, they have already proven that they have no regard for our laws by crossing the border in the first place. And before you call me a racist my wife and I have each sponsored a family of immigrants from Mexico, they are very nice, hardworking honest people who wanted to do things the right way and we were happy to help them out. Yes it is hard to do things the right way as it should be but it is not impossible.

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Mari Kay Whitney · ★Top Commenter

Why should "all the illegals in the US" get citizenship? It is not something to be handed out like a brochure to anyone who holds their hand out....

There, maybe, should be a process for residency, and eventually citizenship if they pursue it, but you don't just hand it out.

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William Bramblett · ★Top Commenter · Florida State University

Just sneak over and pop out a baby, who will then be a U.S. citizen. You can then demand that the government, all for the child, of course, feed and house you, educate your child, and provide fire and police protection and free health care. along with walking around money. It's easy and happens all the time.

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Felipe Salazar · Mount San Antonio College

It is not always the way you think. That is probably what you hear from groups against them. Inmigrants suffer a lot. They get denied many things. In fact, Most of them contribute greatly to the economy of this nation.

Reply · Like · 16 hours ago



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Lucinda DuPuis · ★Top Commenter

I agree with Mari Kay and Dale. America does not owe citizenship to anyone sneaking across our borders and breaking our laws just by doing so. I also believe that any of these people who have children here then their children should not be citizens either.

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Janice Foster · ★Top Commenter

Someone is feeding someone about how hard it is to get citizenship....well I was at the North Ark College in Harrison, Arkansas this past Saturday and I saw 12 young to old march across the stage and get their diploma after schooling completed for their Citizenship. Now they are going to get their GED Diplomas too. If all immigrants will check with their local GED programs they can get enrolled and take Citizenship schooling first. Good Luck.

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Richard McGrath · ★Top Commenter · Framingham, Massachusetts

Celina Alvarez, a Franklin, Tenn., resident who moved to the United States 18 years ago from Jalisco, Mexico, spent \$18,000 in application and attorney fees just to get a green card

And Obama talks amnesty ... sorry " immigration reform" for 20 million illegals.

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Felipe Salazar · Mount San Antonio College

She got ripped off. I paid only 75 dollars and filled my application myself.

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