

California Must Prioritize Citizenship

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More than one-quarter of California's residents are foreign born, a rate higher than any other state in the country. Approximately 9.4 million California residents are immigrants including **3.2 million lawful permanent residents**, eligible for naturalization. California's immigrant communities come from diverse countries, speak more than 250 languages, and live in all 58 of the state's counties. Immigrants and their families are essential to California's economic future and will significantly impact the state for decades to come. It is time California made naturalization a state priority.

Last year, California invested \$3 million in naturalization services, and proposes to continue to fund the program at \$3 million in 2007-08. While this is a good first start, California still lags behind other states in promoting citizenship and immigrant integration. California's naturalization rate of 53% is among the lowest in the nation.¹ Only 8 other states have lower rates than California. Looking only at the six states that are the major destinations for immigrants, California has a lower naturalization rate than all of them, except for Texas. Naturalization is a key entry point into full civic and political participation. As immigrants integrate into society, their investment in the health of our schools, businesses and infrastructure increase. Because naturalization is in our state's interest, California should appropriate more funds towards naturalization services.

Why now?

- **California stands to benefit from higher naturalization rates:** Naturalization confers the right to vote and encourages immigrants to participate more fully in our civic and political life. As immigrants integrate into our communities, their investment into the health of our schools, businesses and neighborhoods increases. Immigrant entrepreneurs contribute significantly to our economy and help make communities thrive. Citizenship helps keep immigrant entrepreneurs here, contributing to our state.
- **Immigrant adults are critical to the success of California's labor force and economic success.** State and national studies have shown immigrants contribute more in taxes than they utilize in services²; positively impact the wage and labor

¹ U.S. Department of Homeland Security. "Estimates of the Legal Permanent Resident Population and Population Eligible to Naturalize in 2002." Prepared by Nancy F. Rytina. May 2004.

² Auerhahn, Louise and Bob Brownstein. 2004. The Economic Effects of Immigration in Santa Clara County and California. Working Partnerships USA.

A Statewide Partnership of:

APALC Asian Pacific American Legal Center • **NILC** National Immigration Law Center • **CHIRLA** Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles • **SIREN** Services Immigrant Rights & Education Network •

prospects of native-born workers³; and bolster the tax base for Social Security and other services for the elderly and aging baby boomer population⁴. Now, more than ever, California must invest in immigrant newcomers and integrate them into our economic and civic structure.

- **The number of immigrants eligible to naturalize continues to increase.** Currently **3.2 million lawful permanent residents** are eligible for naturalization, an increase of 18.5% since 2003. California's \$3 million investment in naturalization services is a good first step, however much more needs to be done. California should further invest in naturalization services to help remove unnecessary obstacles to citizenship and increase opportunities for learning English and civics.
- **States must play a role in reversing federal barriers to naturalization:** The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) continues its campaign to erect more and more obstacles for immigrants who wish to become citizens including a proposed increase in citizenship fees and a proposal to substantially change the current naturalization test. On January 31st 2007, the federal government proposed an 80% fee increase for citizenship applicants from \$330 to \$595 for adults and from \$255 to \$460 for children and a 178% fee increase for lawful permanent residence applicants from \$325 to \$905.⁵

The proposed fee increase is excessive, especially given the fact that since 1988, fees have been increased **six times** from \$60 in 1989 to the current amount. If the proposed fees go through, in less than twenty years, fees for immigrants to become citizens and fully participate in our society **would have increased by 892%**. The proposed USCIS fee increase will make it even harder for California to reap the cultural and economic benefits of its immigrant population by setting up yet one more barrier to the full integration of immigrants into our communities.

³ Peri, Giovanni. How Immigrants Affect California Employment and Wages. Public Policy Institute of California. February 2007.

⁴ "Immigrant workers could be crucial to ensuring the security of aging baby boomers". Rabin, Jeffrey. Los Angeles Times. February 27, 2007.

⁵ The fee for fingerprinting would rise 14 percent from \$70 to \$80.