

[back to article](#)

pressdemocrat.com

FINANCIAL BARRIER

A Detour On The Path To Citizenship

As processing fees increase, naturalization is taking back seat to paying bills

By [MARTIN ESPINOZA](#)
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Published: Thursday, November 8, 2007 at 3:48 a.m.

Angel Jimenez has put his dream of American citizenship on hold while he pursues the dream of home ownership.

It's taking four incomes to cover the \$4,000 monthly mortgage payment that Jimenez and his family must make each month to hold on to their Sebastopol home. Jimenez, his wife, an older daughter and a son all pitch in.

So a few weeks ago, when Jimenez, 60, considered the new price tag for becoming a U.S. citizen, he decided to postpone the momentous day.

Since July 30, the federal government has been charging \$675 to process naturalization applications, an increase of \$275. Also, at the time, the local Catholic Charities agency was charging its own fee for helping him submit his application.

"I can't do it right now," said the cannery worker as he sat in his kitchen while his wife, Maria, prepared dinner. "I'm going to do it, but I have to save up the money little by little until I can afford to become a citizen."

Jimenez's decision is no surprise to those who warned that the fee increase would become a barrier for low-income legal permanent residents who qualify for citizenship. Immigration experts say that the increase, one of several fee hikes that took place over the summer, is causing people to put such things as housing and utility bills ahead of citizenship.

"We've seen a tremendous decrease in clients. It's like the Maytag repair person," said Mary Lowe, naturalization supervisor for Catholic Charities of the Santa Rosa Diocese.

The U.S. Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, USCIS, is reporting a record number of applicants this year compared with last year. In July and August, the agency



KENT PORTER / The Press Democrat
Angel Jimenez of Sebastopol could not afford the increased application fee for citizenship, so he renewed his green card at a lower price.

received more than half a million applications, said Sharon Rummery, a spokeswoman for USCIS's San Francisco district office. Ordinarily, the agency receives about 140,000 applications in a two-month period.

Rummery said USCIS's San Francisco district office, which covers Sonoma County, reported processing 3,727 applications in August and 4,000 in September. Last year, the district office processed 2,697 applications in August and 2,280 in September.

But immigration experts said many of these applications likely were filed before the fee hike and do not reflect what they are seeing. Federal officials acknowledge that application processing time has increased dramatically, from 2 weeks to up to 15 weeks.

"Most, if not all, of those cases were submitted before the fee increase," said Eric Cohen, executive director of the San Francisco-based Immigrant Legal Resource Center. "Anecdotally, what I hear from the field is that there's been a drastic decrease in the number of cases."

Lowe, of Catholic Charities, said that for the three months following the fee increase in late July, her group assisted 65 applicants. In the three months before the fee hike, the organization assisted 209.

Catholic Charities is one of several nonprofit groups contracted by the state to provide assistance to those applying for naturalization. When the federal government announced plans earlier this year to increase its immigration fees, groups across the state were inundated with clients eager to avoid the higher costs.

In Southern California, Michael Ortiz, directing attorney of the Immigration unit of the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, said his group has since seen a sharp decrease in citizenship hopefuls.

Ortiz, whose immigration program covers a significant portion of Los Angeles County, said monthly workshops that once drew between 80 and 120 people now draw only about a dozen.

He said an immigration workshop last Saturday in Bell Gardens drew large crowds, partly because significant loans were being offered to help people pay for the new fee.

"Interest level is still very high in terms of wanting to become a citizen," Ortiz said. "But the fee is just a barrier, and so a lot of people are not able to do it, or they're postponing it. We'll see the long-term effects down the line."

Rummery, the USCIS spokeswoman, said the agency will waive the fee for indigent applicants. "Of course, you have to demonstrate that indeed you are really poor and just can't afford to pay the fee," she said.

Kathy Differding, director of California Human Development Corporation's naturalization program, said that since the fee increase, her program has helped 12 naturalization applicants in Sonoma County, compared with 238 during the seven months prior to the increase.

"I might be doing three applications a week, 12 a month, when we used to do 28 a month," said Differding, adding that fewer clients means fewer reimbursements from the state. "If I don't earn enough money to meet my expenses . . . salaries and office costs,

we can't sustain the program," she said.

For now, the prospect of Angel Jimenez becoming a citizen has taken a backseat to his family's struggle to stay on top of its mortgage payment.

His wife became a U.S. citizen in 1995, and although he qualified to do the same, he said he felt he wasn't ready. But his English has improved and he's been studying U.S. history.

It's just a matter of saving enough money.

"I want to have the right to vote, and all the other rights that Americans have," he said.

You can reach Staff Writer Martin Espinoza at 521-5213 or martin.espinoza@pressdemocrat.com.
