

Rutgers University holding on-campus citizenship program Saturday



Written by

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RUTGERS — It's heavily traveled and rocky at times, but the path to citizenship for many of the area's green card holders could start at Rutgers University as early as this weekend.

Modeled after a similar program at the City University of New York, Citizenship Rutgers aims to aid 100 legal permanent residents seeking citizenship by combining the legal expertise of its two law schools and cross-cultural language skills at the New Brunswick campus Saturday.

Attendees can get free photos, free copies of documents and knowledgeable, language-appropriate help at every step of the naturalization process — from filling out paperwork to certifying documentation to completing applications for fee waivers, organizers said.

Much on the line

Argentinean native and Rutgers professor Rodolfo Juliani is one of 60 people registered for the event. The help being offered Saturday could mean the difference between citizenship and rejection, as well as hundreds of dollars that are on the line, he said.

"You can fill out the application by yourself, though you have to be careful to do it the right way; otherwise, your application can be rejected, and I think the loss of the application fee is \$700," he said.

Juliani counts himself among 4,500 legal permanent resident students who are eligible for citizenship. These taxpaying immigrants are part of a larger network of 1.7 million New Jersey residents who were born overseas, half of whom have sought and received naturalization, said Anastasia Mann, an assistant research professor at Rutgers University and director of the Eagleton Program on Immigration and Democracy.

"It's a core principle of democracy," Mann

said. "There shouldn't be taxation without representation. We want to help those people become voters so that they can have the same rights and privileges as us." But more recently, local naturalization statistics have seen a downward spiral, Mann said. Of the roughly 44,000 newcomers who came to Middlesex County from 1980 to 1989, 75 percent have naturalized as citizens; of the 64,000 who've arrived since 2000, 10 percent have received the same status, according to U.S. Census Bureau statistics.

Juliani's reach for citizenship centers around his aspirations for travel — something that could be a disqualifier for any permanent resident who has spent an extended period outside the U.S. within the past five years.

"For me, it's more of a practical thing," he said. "At Rutgers, I am working in an international research and development program to help support the agriculture in Africa. So having a U.S. passport will facilitate obtaining visas to travel to Africa."

University assistance

That's another reason for Rutgers to get involved, school officials said.

Some of New Jersey's best and brightest are unable to go abroad for outreach or to volunteer their services, limiting the university's ability to become a global microcosm, Mann said.

For a few, having the right to cast a ballot

or the opportunity to travel is all the persuasion they need to evolve from permanent resident status to citizen, said Marco Son, a partner at the Iselin law firm of Son and Keum, which specializes in immigration law.

But for many of Son's clients, citizenship means they no longer have to fear deportation or losing their status of permanent residency, which can result from something as simple as committing a misdemeanor. Citizenship is also a means to sponsor other family members who are looking to permanently live on U.S. soil, he said.

Of all the factors that can affect citizenship, sponsorship could have the greatest impact on the process, Son warned.

The length of time to become a citizen can be relative to the relationship between applicant and sponsor. The process may take only months, when an applicant is sponsored by a spouse or parent; but can draw out to eight years if the relationship is



between siblings.

Many immigrants arrive with a visiting visa, which can extend a six-month stay in the United States. Still others retain a student or work visa, which allows them to stay for the duration of their enrollment or employment, Son said.

A visiting immigrant must apply to receive permanent resident status, and only after five years in the United States, barring any extensive overseas travel, is eligible to seek full citizenship, Son said.

Learning about the U.S.

Once approved for citizenship, applicants are required to take an extensive citizenship exam that tests knowledge on American principles, government and history and required to swear an oath of allegiance that encompasses everything from defending the Constitution to bearing arms on behalf of the United States.

“We’re hoping to get a real cross section of Europeans, Latinos and Asians,” Mann said of Saturday’s event. “Presently, we have between five and 10 lawyers and volunteers who are familiar with citizenship application.” Currently, organizers have reserved volunteers from all three campuses, including law students and speakers of Korean, Mandarin, Ukrainian, Spanish, Italian, French, Yoruba, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Romanian, Gujarati and Hindi.

Organizers are seeking funding to establish and grow the initiative, and drives are

planned for Camden and Newark this fall, Mann said.

AT A GLANCE

Naturalized Citizen: An individual who was born an alien but has lawfully become a U.S. citizen with all the rights of a natural-born citizen guaranteed by the Constitution and governing laws (with the exception of being president or a vice president of the country).

Lawful Permanent Resident: A individual who was born an alien and who has received permission to permanently live and work in the United States. Permanent residents are given green cards to prove their status and are allowed to travel, but must keep their permanent residency in the United States or face losing their status.

IF YOU GO:

Citizenship Rutgers is free and open to the public. It will be held in the Rutgers Student Center on the College Avenue Campus in New Brunswick from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday. For eligibility requirements and to register, call 732-932-9384, ext. 280, or visit www.eagleton.rutgers.edu/Citizenship.

