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Naturalization Potential in 1995 and Beyond

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The Opportunity

By 1996 5.5 million legal permanent residents in the United States will be eligible for U.S. Citizenship. This number represents the largest number of eligible permanent residents under the tenure of one Administration.

Approximately 3.1 million of these people became permanent residents through the Immigration and Reform Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), also known as the Simpson-Mazzoli Law or the Amnesty Law. By their experience with the amnesty process, which employed a similar testing mechanism and standards as the naturalization process, these permanent residents need only fulfill the few, final requirements for citizenship, namely completion of the N-400 application and a final interview. The largest numbers of these legal permanent residents reside in a select grouping of urban areas:

- Chicago
- New York City
- Los Angeles
- Miami
- Texas: El Paso, San Antonio, Houston.

Of the additional 2.4 million people who received their permanent residency status through traditional channels, the majority are required to renew their Alien Registration Cards before the March deadline set by the INS. The cost and application to renew these cards are almost equal to the cost and application for naturalization. In our experience once their fears of the naturalization process are overcome, these residents forgo renewal and opt for citizenship.

An integrated campaign that targets this predominantly urban population has the potential to naturalize over a million new citizens by 1996.

Naturalization is a key issue in regard to the empowerment and stabilization of the immigrant populations in this country. Studies show that naturalized citizens are more apt to act in ways that generate positive growth in the economy, increase political activity, and support overall community development. Over 90% of naturalized citizens register to vote, a much higher rate than U.S. born citizens. Their record of increased civic participation is exemplary. Furthermore, 67% of all naturalized citizens in Chicago are home owners, compared to 39% of all non-Amnesty legal permanent residents and 22% of all Amnesty legal permanent residents. The potential civic impact of these New Americans is great, but these people must become citizens first.

*Alexis - This seems like a
very exciting program politically -
we should promote it -
Mike*

Recognizing this potential, UNO has focused its efforts primarily on naturalization, developing a program strategy aimed at addressing the issues that limit the rates of naturalization. In 1995 we added a home ownership counselling component to our naturalization campaign in response to the high level of interest many of these new citizens have in laying roots in their communities. This approach is expected to generate an active, stable citizenry which will be key to our future organizing efforts.

The Obstacles

What is keeping these people from becoming citizens?

People are not invited into the process nor is the process inviting. We believe this situation results from policy drift and is not by design. The following obstacles limit naturalization potential:

- intimidation that stems from a common negative perception of the INS

Previous immigrant groups were assisted by "mediating institutions," such as political organizations, unions, civic organizations, and churches. A greater collaborative effort existed between the INS and these institutions, and potential citizens were wooed into the "Americanization" process. In contemporary times, however, the INS is seen largely as an enforcement agency and in the experience of these permanent residents, something to be feared. Consequently few seek the assistance of the INS, although many desire citizenship.

- administrative delays at INS

In our experience application processing through the INS can take up to a year. This delay is unnecessary. The current mechanism cannot adequately process the numbers of permanent residents that become eligible for citizenship each year. The perception of the service arm of the INS as an enforcement agency is supported by budget allocations toward naturalization. Currently the INS commits only 10% of its' annual budget to naturalization. Consequently, those that overcome fears of the INS and seek citizenship are thwarted at the administrative level.

The Chicago Model

The Midwest Regional Office of the INS, under the direction of Mr. A.D. Moyer, has developed an innovative strategy that challenges these issues.

The current outreach program for naturalization in Chicago has effectively changed the INS' image in the eyes of many permanent residents. The following points are key to its success.

- "Linea Abierta," the popular show on the leading Hispanic station Channel 44, was developed by Mr. Moyer and Ms. Connie Lara to provide information, education and depolarization on issues of naturalization.
- A community-based naturalization process developed in collaboration with community organizations like UNO, allows applicants to complete the application process and take their interviews at a local neighborhood or community institution. This model replicates the collaborative relationship among mediating institutions that has previously proven effective in bringing thousands of immigrants into the citizenship process efficiently.

This Chicago Model is important to any policy adjustment concerning naturalization because it demonstrates the success a partnership between these mediating institutions and the INS can have. Churches in particular have played a key role in the success of the Chicago Model. Churches have devoted much time, energy, and human resources in support of this program. Their involvement further underscores the level of community interest in naturalizing these large numbers of permanent residents.

The Model is also significant because it has uncovered new mediating institutions, like banks and other financial institutions, who have a keen interest in assisting new citizens. Fannie Mae, which has pioneered the "New Americans Initiative" as part of its Trillion Dollar Initiative, has also demonstrated participatory interest. Finally, the success of this model has spurred the Mayor of Chicago to establish a municipal Naturalization Commission to facilitate this process as well.

Recommendations

To make these solutions complete and comprehensive, my recommendations are as follows:

- Increase resources allocated to naturalization, in terms of personnel and updated equipment.
- Replicate the Chicago Model in other central cities. Assist local INS offices in working with local community organizations to recreate networks of mediating institutions. The Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in Los Angeles and Texas already has extensive church networks in place to carry out this type of campaign.

- Emphasize the urgency of a nationwide naturalization effort in order to take advantage of the Allen Registration Card renewal deadline.

Other ideas include:

- Instituting electronic application filing, such as the IRS has recently implemented.
- Changing the examination procedure.
- Changing the language requirements.

Several key people are aware of the opportunity that this represents. They include Commissioner Doris Meissner, A.D. Moyer, Fannie Mae's Jim Johnson, Chicago's Mayor Richard M. Daley, key members from the IAF, Channel 44 General Manager José Lamas and from UNO, myself.

A meeting with these individuals, either together in a group or separately, to discuss these suggestions further would prove fruitful. I believe that these policy adjustments are feasible and worthwhile.

To: Alexis 2/17/95
From Mike

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