I cannot wait to become a citizen. I care about what’s going on in this country, I care about getting involved. I want to vote. I want to be a part of it.”

Maria Ruiz, legal resident from Mexico. She has to wait three more years to apply.

Steps to the American Dream

Immigrants hoping to become citizens must first navigate a flurry of paperwork

By Scott Hewitt

Cornerstone Staff Writer

Maria Ruiz has felt both blessed and voi- nant since 1989. That’s when she escaped a bad marriage and a bad economy in Mexico and came to the United States. Since then, she said, she has been living the American Dream, working hard, providing a better life for her children, falling in love and marrying a wonderful partner, buying a home, getting settled in Clark College.

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Although “immigration issues” could be her downfall from legal advice.

Rosalia Pitkin, Clark College’s program coordinator for English as a second language and Latinx outreach, helps Manuel Armero de Beaverton, Ore., fill out paperwork at a free clinic aimed at helping legal immigrants apply for citizenship.

Complicated questions

Approximately 70 hopeful immigrants gained entrance into the course of the day, according to Clark College program coordinator Rosalia Pitkin, and about half applied for citizenship. Many were Hispanic, but there were also Romans and Eastern Europeans, Africans and others.

Pitkin, who makes the rounds to churches, school districts and other organizations to spread the word about resources for local Latinos, said people seeking help with immigration are usually working green card holders who are raising families and learning English; many are taking

Taboo grows on texting, driving

Push is on to add social condemnation to legal sanctions

By John Brantley

Columbia staff writer

If you were to drive up to your girlfriend’s house with a bottle of whiskey in your hand, it might not get over well. If you drank and drove, you’d likely get an earful from her parents and have the door slammed in your face.

So why do so many folks consider it OK to drive with a cell phone held to their ear, chattering away, which is said to be as dangerous as driving while intoxicated?

And what about driving while texting, which is believed even more dangerous and led to the deaths of a bicyclist,华盛顿 Bay High School teacher, Gorden Patterson, in September 2009; Dangerous for the driver too: He got a five-year prison sentence.

A group of volunteers, the Driver Distraction Task Force of Washington State, says its members are looking for ways to drive those points home, and they’re inviting others to help.

The mission: “To make phone-related distracted driving as socially and legally unacceptable in Washington state as drunk driving is today.”

Task force members include emergency-room physicians, public-health experts, crash-injury investigators, attorneys, physicians, members of bicycling groups and parents of distracted driving victims.

On its website, http://tollstractions.org, the group cites research that the seller who is talking on cellphones a half-second longer to brake in an emergency, and that “they miss more than half of the visual cues spotted by attentive drivers.”

As for texting drivers, the danger is extreme, for themselves and their friends and others in cars. Research says texting while driving increases reaction times by 30 percent, and that texting drivers look down at their phones for an average of 5 seconds, about a football field’s length while driving at highway speeds.

“Common denominator,” the task force says, “is that we are frightened and appalled by what we’re seeing on the roads every day, and we are committed to making a difference.”

A link on the tollstractions.org website contains a link to a survey by students at Seattle’s Ingraham High School, who have made a change to discourage texting while driving.

Using about $790 donated by State Farm Insurance, students are offering five prizes for the best electronic and highway billboard designs that show the dangers of driving while texting. And
for handling taxpayer money was county budget analyst Adriana Prata, who was born in 1977.

Read the "All Politics in Local" blog at www.columbian.com/weblogs.

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citizenship and language classes at Clark.

Even if they've already learned the language and jumped through the bureaucratic hoops, filling out the forms and facing down the citizenship test can be daunting. Paralegals learning to guide others through the process must watch a 45-minute video and take part in a two-hour training session, according to Elsa Batres-Boni, a OneAmerica organizer.

"It's a long, complicated process even for a person who speaks the language," she said.

And not just long — it's also fraught with obstacles and dangers. Lisa Seifert, an immigration attorney from Olympia, said immigration laws have tightened up tremendously over the past decade, and clinics like Saturday's have a "huge protective effect" for people who could be in danger of deportation or other trouble because of old blemishes or minor irregularities on criminal or other legal records.

That's why it's good to have free attention from an expert who knows the law, Seifert said.

"Yes, there are some cases where we say, 'You really shouldn't apply,' " she said. "It can be a complicated question. Even a trained volunteer can steer you wrong."

Seifert said most immigrants "either can't afford or don't perceive that they can afford legal services." Plus, she said, Vancouver is not exactly bursting with immigration attorneys. There was just one local volunteer attorney on hand Saturday — all the rest came from outside the community.

But, she added, the area "sure is bursting with immigrants."

"I look forward to getting my right to vote," said Richard Perez, who came from Venezuela to California and then made it to Portland in 2004. "I look forward to being a part of this beautiful country."

Is he ready to apply for citizenship?

"I'm ready," Perez smiled. "I'm ready."

Fear, facts

For those who aren't ready, it's often a matter of getting documents in order and enduring the required waiting period. For others, it's a matter of getting past fear.

"A lot of folks have been green card holders for the longest time, but they may be afraid of passing a test. Or having gotten a traffic ticket," said Batres-Boni.

Helping sort out fear from facts Saturday was translator Adriana Cazoria, a Mexican immigrant and green card holder. She has been in the U.S. for 15 years, she said, but was undocumented for 10 of them. She's looking forward to applying for citizenship in the future, too, she said — but first she has to take citizenship classes and clean up her record.

And after that? "Everything is possible," said Cazoria. One fond wish is a job with the U.S. Government, she said, so she can represent her people.

Citizenship means you can vote, have a louder voice in community decisions and politics, sponsor family members who want to immigrate, too, raise children who are citizens, gain public benefits — and travel.

"A big motivation is not to have to deal with immigration and customs anymore," said Seifert. "If the law changes, the next time you go through the airport you may suddenly have new problems. They want to see an end to that danger."

"Being undocumented is always being scared, afraid, insecure," Ruiz said.

"You don't have any voice. When you show up anywhere the first thing is you're afraid they're going to ask you if you're legal. Ask for your documents."

Ruiz said she would never go back to Mexico — but then she amended that. She might go back for retirement, she said, and soak up some sunshine.

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