

"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 am excited."

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



Photos by ZACHARY KAUFMAN/The Columbian

OneAmerica organizer Elsa Batres-Boni, left, snaps a photo of Angel Yanez, 28, of Oregon City, Ore., who had just completed his application for citizenship Saturday at Clark College. Yanez said he's been waiting for four years, and if all goes well he'll be a U.S. citizen in just a few months.

STEPS TO THE American dream

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

By **SCOTT HEWITT**
Columbian staff writer

Maria Ruiz has felt both blessed and voiceless 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 and settling down in Portland.

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Unlicensed "immigration assistants" could be banned from giving legal advice.

"Save and work and save and work," was her philosophy of life, said Ruiz, who works as a courier for medical testing laboratory.

"This country has given me the opportunity to be treated like a human being. To be treated with respect. I love it very much. I feel like I belong here."

Does this country share the feeling? On Saturday, Ruiz came to a Citizenship Day hosted by Clark College where volunteer attorneys, paralegals, translators and other community resources offered free consultations and assistance with filling out citizenship applications.

The answer for Ruiz was — not yet. She's been a legal resident with a green card for the past two years; before that she was undocumented. To apply for legal citizenship, you must have been a lawful, permanent resident for five years, or three years if you're married to a U.S. citizen.

"I cannot wait to become a citizen," she said. "I care about what's going on in this country, I care about getting involved. I want to vote. I am excited."

Saturday's event at Clark was the



Rosalba Pitkin, Clark College's program coordinator for English as a second language and Latino outreach, helps Manuel Amdor of Beaverton, Ore., fill out paperwork at a free clinic aimed at helping legal immigrants apply for citizenship. Such events are expected to lose most of their funding in the next state budget.

third annual Citizenship Day sponsored by OneAmerica, a Seattle-based immigrants-advocacy group, and the American Immigration Lawyers Association. Lutheran Community Services helped provide translators and other services.

Despite the sponsorships, 90 percent of the funding for Citizenship Day programs and other naturalization services comes from the state and is likely to be eliminated in the developing Washington budget, folks involved with the program said.

State Sen. Craig Pridemore, D-Vancouver, was on hand, to tour the Citizenship Day proceedings and show his support, he said. Similar immigration clinics were held Saturday in Des Moines and Mt. Vernon.

Complicated questions

Approximately 70 hopeful immigrants came through in the course of the day, according to Clark College program coordinator Rosalba Pitkin, and about half applied for citizenship. Many were Hispanic, but there were also Russians 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

Citizens:

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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 folks 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 Cazorla, 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 Cazorla. 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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