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THE NEW NEW YORKERS; The higher price of citizenship; Rate increases are making it more difficult for some already cash- pinched immigrants to make their American dreams come true

BYLINE: BY **JONATHAN SCHIENBERG**. **Jonathan Schienberg** is a freelance writer.

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As a bus boy at the Copacabana club in midtown Manhattan, Dominican immigrant Juan Lagares is working overtime to afford his American dream.

To apply to be a naturalized U.S. citizen, Lagares, 22, of Washington Heights, will have to pay about \$800, or about three weeks of his salary, and still find a way to support himself and his 2-year-old daughter. To make up for the money he is spending to become an American, Lagares said he will be working extra hours at the club.

But compared to other immigrants who are just now filing their naturalization applications, Lagares got a good deal.

New fees just started

Having filed his citizenship application three months ago, Lagares was able to avoid the new fee increases enacted by the Department of Homeland Security on April 30. The cost of many immigrant benefit applications was raised by \$55 to \$80, the largest increase ever, according to federal immigration officials.

"I was lucky in a way because I filed for citizenship before the fees increased," Lagares said.

He explained that immigration advocates advised him to also renew his green card, or proof of his permanent immigrant status in the United States, as well as his Dominican passport while he waits for his citizenship application to be completed.

"But now I have to pay another \$455 to renew my passport and green card," Lagares said. "It doesn't make any sense. ... I don't know how the government expects us to afford to live."

In an effort to stem some of the financial sting, thousands of newer arrivals to the United States flooded New York City's immigrant service organizations in April in anticipation of the rising costs of the applications.

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"We had tons of low-income immigrants lined up trying to beat the deadline, so many in fact, that we had to turn some away," said Raquel Batista, executive director of the Northern Manhattan Coalition for Immigrant Rights, a nonprofit advocacy and immigrant service group in Washington Heights.

One of the immigrants who sought help from the coalition was Gledis Mitchell, 56, a mother of two and another Dominican immigrant living in Washington Heights.

Mitchell, who makes just under \$10 an hour as a home attendant, recently applied for naturalization. She lamented that had she filed before the prices were raised, she would have paid a total of \$310 instead of \$390.

"It was already very difficult for me to afford," Mitchell said. "Eighty dollars more is a lot of money for me."

Chris Bentley, a spokesman for the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, said the increases were based on a review of the application fees that Congress requests the agency to carry out every two years.

Hikes called necessary

"These fee adjustments are solely for the purpose of recouping the costs of doing business," Bentley said. "We have to find a way to pay for the adjudication of applications."

Bentley said that with the added money coming in, the agency has begun to whittle away at the enormous number of backlogged applications.

"We won't get there overnight," Bentley cautioned, "but by 2006, we plan to meet our promise of a six-month waiting period for all applications."

Applications are taking a year to two years to be processed, Bentley said.

The government's promise means little to Sok Kang, executive director of Korean Immigrant Services in Flushing, a nonprofit group that has helped more than 10,000 people become U.S. citizens in the last decade.

He said he has seen some of his clients wait up to five years to gain permanent immigrant status in the United States. Some have waited so long for travel documents that they have lost a loved one in their home country without being there to say goodbye.

"I really hope they do it, but I'm not very confident after working in this business for so long," Kang said. "The truth is immigrants are willing to pay any cost to become Americans. The question is when will the government finally be willing to reciprocate?"

GRAPHIC: Newsday Photo/Jiro Ose - Dominican immigrant Juan Lagares, 22, of Washington Heights was lucky: He applied before the price increases took effect on April 30.

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