

CLINIC Newsletter, June 2004

Is Citizenship Day, 9/17, on Your Calendar?

Citizenship Day on September 17 is an important holiday to remember on our calendars, especially for the Church and immigration service providers working with newcomers, as it provides an opportunity to celebrate the work we do, the value of citizenship, and the contributions of immigrants to our communities.

Citizenship Day was established by President Harry Truman in 1952. It replaced “I am an American Day,” which had been celebrated since 1940 on the third Sunday in May. September 17 was chosen for Citizenship Day because it was the day on which the U.S. Constitution was signed in 1787. The purpose of this holiday is to celebrate the privileges, rights, and responsibilities of U.S. citizenship, and to honor both native-born and naturalized citizens. Citizenship Day is traditionally celebrated with pageantry and speeches. In recent years, some U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) offices have held large oath ceremonies on Citizenship Day, while newspapers have featured articles about naturalization and new citizens.

Citizenship Day is a chance to highlight the many benefits that citizenship brings to individuals, families, and communities. Among these are derivative citizenship for children, the ability to sponsor family members to legally immigrate to the U.S., the right to vote, the preservation of public benefits, protection from deportation, the ability to travel freely and safely on a U.S. passport, and increased access to public employment and educational scholarships. With these benefits come certain civic responsibilities. In a speech celebrating the very first Citizenship Day, President Truman exhorted all citizens to educate themselves about our government, stay informed of the “great problems of the day,” and exercise the right to vote. He said, “The success of free government depends upon the willingness of the citizen to participate in it, to contribute to it, and to sacrifice for it.”

There are many ways in which our network can make Citizenship Day meaningful. The following are just a few ideas. Many of these activities can be done on an ongoing basis throughout the year.

- Organize a citizenship group processing workshop.
- Recruit naturalized citizens to assist applicants in a group processing workshop.
- Initiate and participate in a special oath ceremony with the local USCIS office.
- Conduct voter registration at oath ceremonies and on an ongoing basis at your office. In many communities, certain individuals or organizations can become “volunteer deputy registrars.” This allows them to accept voter registration applications on behalf of the registrar. Contact your local voter registrar’s office for more information. Even if you are not a deputy registrar, you can hand out voter registration cards for the applicants to submit on their own.
- Get the local newspaper to write a story about new citizens and the challenges faced in the naturalization process.
- Launch and sustain ongoing community outreach about Citizenship Day and the benefits of citizenship.
- Conduct a volunteer drive for English/civics tutors to help immigrants prepare for the citizenship test.

- Offer ongoing citizenship test preparation sessions at your office.
- Set up a colorful display in your waiting area about Citizenship Day with multi-lingual informational materials about the benefits and requirements of naturalization.
- Draw funder attention to your citizenship services and the large number of eligible and soon-to-be eligible immigrants, referring to the September 2003 Urban Institute report, *Trends in Naturalization*, available at <http://www.urban.org>.
- Arrange for your bishop to submit a letter to the editor of your local newspaper on Citizenship Day. CLINIC has created a letter for your use. For a copy of the letter, contact Scot Christenson at 202-635-5816 or schristenson@cliniclegal.org.
- Encourage parishes to incorporate Citizenship Day into the mass by recognizing the history and vitality of immigrants in the Church and offering a special blessing for naturalized citizens.
- Organize an immigrant-led assembly to demonstrate for immigrants' rights.
- Visit a Congressional representative's office to voice support for pro-immigrant legislation.
- Organize a letter-writing campaign to Congress in support of pro-immigrant legislation.
- Work with local schools to give presentations about citizenship. Miami-Dade County Public Schools provide a lesson plan for Citizenship Day, available at <http://www.patriotism.org/citizenship/page2.html>.
- Invite your local USCIS Office of Citizenship representative (if applicable) to your Citizenship Day activities.

CLINIC has a long and successful history of citizenship work. Its naturalization projects – run through local member agencies using federal, state, and private funding – have helped more than 70,000 persons to become citizens over the last seven years. Most of the beneficiaries have been hard-to-naturalize immigrants such as the elderly, disabled, persons with limited English language skills, and refugees. CLINIC's projects have included not just legal services, but community outreach, English classes, and citizenship instruction. CLINIC's popular handbook, *Citizenship for Us*, is now in its third edition, with over 1,100 copies distributed. Other citizenship-related publications have included *Citizenship for Refugee Elders* and *Citizenship at Risk*. For the last six years, CLINIC has been meeting regularly with USCIS headquarters to advocate on citizenship issues, calling for improved customer service, opposing unnecessary fee increases, and defending the rights of disabled applicants. CLINIC has also provided input on: (1) the new Forms N-400 and N-648; (2) policy guidance on the naturalization oath waiver, reasonable accommodations for the disabled, and the disability waiver; and (3) the planned revisions to the citizenship test.

Citizenship is a core service provided by CLINIC's local member agencies. Some agencies have particularly strong and vibrant citizenship programs, a few of which are mentioned here.

Catholic Charities Hogar Hispano, Diocese of Arlington, VA

Hogar Hispano holds eight naturalization group processing workshops per year which attract 50-80 applicants each. The workshops are held at a community center in an ethnically diverse neighborhood. They are co-sponsored by multiple organizations and attract a very diverse clientele of African, Middle Eastern, Latino, and Asian immigrants. An officer from the local USCIS office usually attends to answer applicants' questions, and Hogar charges a modest fee of \$25 for applicants to attend the workshop. The workshops have become such an important part

of Hogar's citizenship program that the agency managed to continue them even after losing the federal funding that had supported them for the last six years. In addition to organizing the workshops, Hogar's longtime Naturalization Coordinator, Esmael Hussein, also teaches citizenship classes for elderly applicants and conducts outreach on employment discrimination to workshop attendees under a grant from the Department of Justice's Office of Special Counsel. Mr. Hussein recently received BIA accreditation and looks forward to representing clients at the citizenship interview. Hogar's highly regarded citizenship program is a model for other agencies.

Catholic Charities of Stockton, CA

Under a 3 ½ year grant from the state, Catholic Charities organized two to three citizenship group processing workshops per month through parishes in a nine-county area. The workshops attracted 25 to 200+ people. They were usually held in a school gym or parish hall and were advertised in parish bulletins and Spanish language media. Parish volunteers helped with set-up and provided refreshments. Workshops were also held in migrant worker camps and a Sikh temple. Under this project, Catholic Charities began offering a weekly citizenship interview preparation class, taught by two retired teachers, which continues to this day. The agency also created a citizenship information packet with a CD of the 100 questions, flash cards of test questions, and excerpts from CLINIC's publication, *Citizenship for Us*, which remains in demand. Catholic Charities' Co-Director, Judy McDonnell, notes that many clients returned for family immigration services after naturalizing, having established a sense of trust in the agency's services.

Catholic Charities of Dallas, TX

Catholic Charities of Dallas was approached by Congressman Martin Frost's office for help with a group processing workshop that was scheduled for January 24, 2004. The Congressman's staff took the lead on planning the workshop. They arranged for the workshop to be held in a school cafeteria and for the postal service to be on site to accept application packets for certified mail. They held a press conference and widely publicized the workshop in the Spanish language media. USCIS staff were invited and gave a Powerpoint presentation for applicants on how to fill out the N-400. Catholic Charities staff pre-screened applicants for eligibility, took photographs, and reviewed all completed applications for quality control.

Catholic Charities staff were skeptical about the turnout since attendance had dwindled at the citizenship workshops the agency had held several years ago. In addition, it was a miserable, cold, rainy Saturday. Yet, the workshop was deluged with 320 applicants. The demand was so high that additional applicants had to be turned away at the end of the workshop. Rosario Mezo, Catholic Charities' Program Director, says the workshop "was a great experience, and the staff were with joy to see so many people coming. It woke up the spirit of citizenship in our community. Now, the staff are asking when we can have another one."

Catholic Charities of Rockville Centre, NY

Catholic Charities of Rockville Centre is very active in registering immigrants to vote. The agency sends staff and volunteers to naturalization oath ceremonies on a monthly basis to register new voters. The volunteers are recruited from local high schools, colleges, and parishes. This model is extremely effective with large-scale oath ceremonies. In 2002, the local immigration office naturalized 10,000 people per day in large oath ceremonies that were

scheduled every three months. At these ceremonies, Catholic Charities staff and volunteers would stand by each door with voter registration materials, assist new citizens in filling out the form, and collect the forms for mailing. The agency registered about 6,000 people per day in this manner.

In addition to attending the oath ceremonies, Catholic Charities staff call newly naturalized clients to remind them about voter registration. The agency also screens all clients who come in to the office by asking them if they are U.S. citizens and are registered to vote. Those who are eligible to register are given voter registration materials and instructions for filling out and sending the form. They are also invited to participate in civic activities organized by Catholic Charities, such as visits to legislators. “Most people register because they want to vote in the next presidential election, but we try to emphasize various ways to practice citizenship, like voting on school budgets,” says Carmen Maquilon, Catholic Charities’ Director of Immigrant Services.

These programs all demonstrate a great need for citizenship assistance in immigrant communities across the country. In their 1999 statement, *From Newcomers to Citizens*, the bishops stated, “As citizens, we have a responsibility to assist those who qualify to take advantage of the opportunity to become U.S. citizens.” The bishops further stressed the importance of citizenship by quoting Cardinal Theodore McCarrick: “By becoming citizens, [immigrants] reinforce the equities that they have built in this country and become full partners in the course and life of our nation.” Citizenship Day is an excellent opportunity for renewing and sustaining citizenship work, on a community-wide basis, within immigration programs and the Church.

If your agency is planning any special activities for Citizenship Day, contact Jeff Chenoweth (202-635-5826, jchenoweth@cliniclegal.org) or Laura Burdick (202-635-5820, lburdick@cliniclegal.org) to share your stories. We plan to highlight these activities in a later issue of the newsletter.