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## Why it often takes years for eligible immigrants to become U.S. citizens

By Ibrahim Hirsi | 02/17/16



All  
that

MinnPost photo by Ibrahim Hirsi

Soon-to-be U.S. citizens preparing for their their citizenship test at the Hmong Cultural Center in St. Paul.

Esther Ekpon ever wanted was to become a U.S. citizen.

An immigrant from Togo who had sewn clothes for a living in the French-speaking West African nation, Ekpon came to Minnesota a decade ago — knowing no English but with a dream to establish a life in the United States.

After her arrival, she came to feel she wasn't going to achieve that dream without gaining citizenship, which she believed could offer her more opportunities.

So last October, Ekpon decided to submit her application to the U.S. Citizenship and

Immigration Services (USCIS), which is part of the federal Department of Homeland Security. In December, she had her fingerprints taken for security screening. And in the coming months, she hopes to finally take the citizenship test, recite the oath of allegiance — and join more than 9,000 Minnesotans who became naturalized citizens last year.

Though Ekpon was determined to become a U.S. citizen, she still waited a decade before deciding to apply — a timeframe not at all uncommon among Minnesota's growing immigrant population. In fact, due to a host of factors, thousands of eligible immigrants often wait years, even decades, before they even start the process.

## Who qualifies?

Over the last 35 years, **the immigrant population in Minnesota has tripled**. In fact, since 2011 alone, more than 52,000 authorized immigrants have come to Minnesota, according to the USCIS. Today, immigrants and refugees account for more than 7 percent of the state's population, with nearly 52 percent of them being naturalized citizens, according to the **American Immigration Council**.

Yet the process remains a daunting one for many immigrants, with the first hurdle for prospective citizens being the most obvious one: Not everyone who wants to become a naturalized citizen can become one. Immigrant applicants must be 18 or older and have been legal permanent residents of the United States for at least five years (three years if they're married to American citizen). Children who were born outside the United States to American citizens are also eligible, as are immigrants who serve in the U.S. Armed Forces.

Basically, you have to have a green card — a legal document for noncitizens who are lawful residents of the U.S. — in order to qualify, says Bao Thao, an immigration attorney with the **Immigration Law Center of Minnesota**. “If you don't have a green card, you cannot apply for citizenship.”

Speaking to Ekpon and other immigrants at a recent citizenship class at the **Open Door Learning Center** in Minneapolis, Thao stressed one of the ways potential applicants can get tripped up when it comes to the residency requirement: the need to maintain continuous presence in the United States before starting the naturalization process.

“You cannot stay out of the U.S. for more than six months, unless you get permission first,” she said. “If you leave the country and you don't come back within six months, the government can say, ‘You abandoned your status here ... you don't want to be a permanent resident anymore,’ and they'll cancel your status.”

## The big test

Ekpon, who came to the U.S. after winning a green card through the **Diversity Immigrant Visas**

**Program** in 2005, became eligible to apply for citizenship in 2010. Yet she waited for another five years before applying.

Her reason was a common one among applicants: She felt she wasn't yet prepared to take the language and civics tests — and didn't want to have to go through the process more than once.

For the language test, a USCIS official gives the applicant three English sentences to read and three others to write. The applicant must be able to read at least one of them to the satisfaction of the official, and write another sentence correctly. For the civics portion of the test, the same officer will ask the applicant 10 of the **100 civics questions** that are part of a citizenship study guide, queries on everything from the history of the United States to the structure of the federal government. Of the 10 questions, the applicant must answer at least six correctly.

“People say it's easy,” Ekpon said of the test. “When you speak English, it's easy. When you don't speak English, it's not easy.”

There is help for people like Ekpon in the Twin Cities. More than 100 community centers across Minnesota have opened up their doors to assist eligible immigrants with subjects on the test, a crucial final step in the long to becoming American citizens.

Among those organizations is the Open Door Learning Center, a program of the Minnesota Literacy Council that's located on Lake Street, where Ekpon spends three hours each week, learning and practicing the test.

Last Friday, Ekpon and volunteer Paige Hagen, a student at the University of Minnesota, were locked in a quiet classroom in the center as they went through the 100 questions during a study session. One by one, Hagen asked all the 100 questions, which were printed in black ink on yellow notecards. One by one, Ekpon answered all 100 correctly.

“It was really humbling for me when I started,” admitted Hagen. “On my first day, I had to quiz someone who had an interview coming up, and I had to look through to double check that their answers were correct because I wasn't sure myself.”

Other organizations that also offer free naturalization classes include St. Paul's Hmong Cultural Center, where Mexican-born Maria Del Carmen Nava spends six hours each week studying for the test. “I've been studying hard for the citizenship test for about three months now,” Nava said recently. “I can't wait to be done and say, ‘I'm an American' soon.”

## **The cost**

Another hurdle to becoming a U.S. citizen is the cost of applying. Currently, citizenship applicants pay \$680 — \$595 application fee and \$85 biometric fee — to begin their naturalization process, regardless of whether their application is successful.

This nonrefundable fee has long kept thousands of eligible immigrants from applying for citizenship, say those assist people with their naturalization process.

“People are afraid that they will not pass,” explained Txongpao Lee, executive director of the **Hmong Cultural Center**. “If they don’t pass, they’re afraid that they’re just losing money. So they don’t want to do it.”

Some, like Ekpon, qualify for a fee waiver, which is meant to help people with financial difficulties. And yet, though thousands of immigrants may qualify, advocates say that many aren’t aware of the waiver’s existence. Even for those who do know it exists, it adds another layer of bureaucracy to an already long and arduous process.

### **‘No time, just work, work, work’**

Lack of a permanent home is another factor that thwarts many eligible immigrants from seeking citizenship. Nava, who emigrated from Mexico, is among thousands of who had to hold off their naturalization process because they moved so often.

In fact, though Nava became eligible for citizenship 25 years ago, it wasn’t until recently that she filed her citizenship application. The reason, she said, was to avoiding the risk of losing important documents from immigration officials because she never had a permanent place she called home. “I moved to different places,” she said. “No time. Just work, work, work.”

Lee, the citizenship instructor at the Hmong center, faced a similar experience. Though he arrived in the United States in 1984 after escaping persecution in Laos, he didn’t apply for his citizenship until 11 years later. “I’d been busy with school,” said Lee, who graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire in 1992. “I’d been moving from one place to another. So when I became permanent [in St. Paul], I applied for citizenship.”

Today, Lee encourages his students to prioritize the citizenship process. “I try to educate them about how they can use their citizenship wisely,” he said.

During her Friday presentation, The Open Door Learning Center’s Thao detailed what those advantages are for a roomful of prospective citizens, from obtaining citizenship for spouses more quickly to sponsoring family members to come to the United States, not to mention the right to vote, work in government jobs and easily travel around the world without restrictions.

For Nava, all of those benefits are good reasons to earn her citizenship. But there is one more reason: Her three children. “They always ask me, ‘Mom, why are you not a citizen? You have to become a citizen soon.’”

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**COMMENTS (3)****Congratulations...**

SUBMITTED BY DOUG GRAY ON FEBRUARY 17, 2016 - 2:31PM.

...to all our newly naturalized citizens. They can be truly proud to be Americans.

**Not Supposed to be Easy**

SUBMITTED BY JIM MILLION ON FEBRUARY 17, 2016 - 3:31PM.

Seeking citizenship is not supposed to be free and easy; nor, is it supposed to be tortuous.

Most people (Americans, if you will) still believe that which is learned and earned means more than what is granted or gifted.

We all can reference items in our own histories that mean more because we followed the path to our goals: college, grad school, first job, promotion, etc.

I know those who have come here to work, to then stay and gain citizenship. They didn't object to the process. And, they were all more earnest about their new identities than many of us who simply came down the destiny chute.

Spanish is long-considered the easiest of languages to learn. We all need to seriously require Spanish curriculum at Middle School level, along with better English grammar coursework. That's also fair



Those coming from non-Latin language bases may have difficulty with our citizenship language test; however, that's their reasonable price of admission. No nation can function effectively with more than two official languages. Cultural cohesion depends on that. Because we are formed from the Anglo East and the Latino West, English and Spanish are the elemental languages here.

Let's all strive to better ourselves: birth natives, naturalized citizens and those diverse groups in process.

### **What About Immigrants on Special Skills Visas Who Speak English?**

SUBMITTED BY THALIA JAY ON FEBRUARY 17, 2016 - 5:35PM.

When you next have an article on immigrants, would you please also mention that many immigrants, like myself, also arrive in this country highly skilled with good English language skills. We arrive on work visas (H1B), and we have skills (more commonly STEM) this country needs to help its economy? And that we, along with our fellow immigrants who come by other means, work to help improve this country from the moment we arrive here.

Because I think this article plays into the stereotype that every single immigrant was poor and has come here to "seek a better life" only in the economic sense. For a lot of Americans whose ancestors arrived in previous generations, the implication of this is that we should, therefore, be very grateful for any and every opportunity to struggle as it could only lead to something better than what we had before.

Even if we were all poor, years and years of intense struggle does not qualify as "a better life". Which is actually another reason why people are not so eager to apply for citizenship. Everyone wants a good quality of life.

Those people who self-righteously feel they have the right to dictate that, "that which is learned and earned means more than what is granted or gifted" when it comes to other people would actually probably never pass the citizenship test themselves. They never "learned and earned" their citizenship it was "gifted and granted" to them -- perhaps it should be revoked so they can earn it?

Fact: All immigrants have to go through the process of getting a green card. Nobody is complaining about that. We all have to pay the fee which sky-rocketed under the Bush administration, and has become one of several barriers for a lot of people.

But when we do have the fee, and the green card, and the language skills, we might still hesitate to apply for citizenship. Our reasons may be varied, and very personal. One thing we have in common, is that this is the point where one realizes that citizenship is a PERSONAL CHOICE.

After years, and years, and years of, "either jump another hurdle or go back" we finally have a choice. Would you rush to apply for citizenship after all that?

I'm savoring my choice. And taking the time I need to think about whether I want to apply for citizenship or not.

Nobody has the right to tell me I should be grateful, (because I earned this) and nobody can tell me when or if I should apply for citizenship.