

The Dallas Morning News

Church groups join immigrants in a big push for citizenship

Dianne Solis, Senior writer

January 21, 2018

Amalia Rojas is in her 93rd winter. But that's not too late for this Mexican immigrant to become a U.S. citizen.

So with her green card on the table, next to her nutrition shake, and *rebozo* over her head on a recent freezing cold afternoon, she filled out government forms.

Rojas is part of an unusual surge of immigrants around the U.S. who are making a sudden push to become U.S. citizens. In each case, these applicants have already been vetted and qualified for legal permanent residency.

There are about 250,000 immigrants in Dallas-Fort Worth region who have green cards and have waited the generally required five years to apply for naturalization, according to the Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration at the University of Southern California. Nationwide, there are 8.8 million who are eligible to become U.S. citizens but haven't done it yet, says the Chicago-based National Partnership for New Americans.

In North Texas, Dallas Area Interfaith, a coalition of largely church-based groups, is leading a search for potential citizens in the pews. Their allies are the Roman Catholic priests and nuns who work in area parishes.

"The people trust their church," says Socorro Perales, a senior organizer with the interfaith group and herself a Mexican immigrant who became a U.S. citizen years ago.

They also seem to trust Perales, a former law enforcement officer, and Josephine Lopez-Paul, a former teacher and the group's lead organizer.

The Spanish-speaking duo set a goal of getting 1,000 people in a year to become U.S. citizens. They quickly surpassed it. In two months, they signed up 1,200 people with green cards to start prepping them for the citizenship test and helping them fill out forms for the process known formally as naturalization.

"The reasons so many don't take the final step [to citizenship] is they feel disenfranchised," Lopez-Paul said. "But they can make democracy work for them."



Amalia Rojas, a 93-year-old legal permanent resident, fills out U.S. citizenship forms at Catholic Charities of Dallas. (Dianne Solis/The Dallas Morning News)

Lopez-Paul and Perales have worked in the churches, grooming leaders and forming groups that tackle everything from citizenship issues to lobbying for better housing. Citizenship and greater political participation rose to the top last year.

“The goal is to not only get people to naturalize, but to participate in public life,” Lopez-Paul said. That means getting them to vote once they are citizens, and lobbying candidates about issues of importance to them, she said.

"If we can organize them and get them engaged, we could change the face of politics," Perales said. "The fact that they are becoming citizens shows they are engaged."

In the pews

The interfaith group does its work with the blessing of the Catholic Diocese of Dallas.

"Citizenship is such an important part of being able to vote and participate freely in the political process," said Auxiliary Bishop Greg Kelly, who is bilingual and has been in the Dallas area for decades.

Getting parish priest involvement in the citizenship drive means explaining “what it is and what it isn’t,” the auxiliary bishop said. “It isn’t partisan politics. ... It is part of the democratic process and making sure everybody participates and is heard on the issues.”

So on Sundays, Perales heads to the Catholic churches.

At the end of one Mass at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in West Dallas, Perales even took to the pulpit with the Rev. Luis Gerardo Arraiza at her side. They preached citizenship and its value.

Catholic Charities of Dallas staff have come to the churches to explain the citizenship process, too. In turn, many have gone to Catholic Charities headquarters to take classes and fill out the forms.

At St. Philip the Apostle Catholic Church in southeast Dallas, 300 parishioners with green cards signed up within weeks. Parishioner Lily Rodriguez said many want citizenship because President Donald Trump’s tough immigration policies have made them nervous. Trump’s calls for cuts to legal migration are adding to their fears, said Rodriguez, a daughter of Mexican immigrants who became U.S. citizens in the 1990s. The Rev. Eduardo Gonzalez, pastor at St. Philips, is a key part of that, said Rodriguez. “He has their trust,” she said. “What he wants, they dive in to.”



Socorro Perales (left), along with Xochi Guerra (far right), from Dallas Area Interfaith, talks with Antonio Rangel, a legal resident, on applying for citizenship after Sunday services at Lourdes Catholic Church.

(Rex C. Curry/Special Contributor)

There is still a huge hurdle for many applicants. Fees cost about \$725 at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, the federal agency handling applications.

“We have many who are not sending in their application because they don’t have \$700,” Perales said.

Lopez-Paul and Perales are exploring ways to raise funds to defray the cost.

At the National Partnership for New Americans, which promotes citizenship, executive director Joshua Hoyt said there are community development credit unions in Chicago that have set up micro loans for the naturalization fee. Certain cities provide financial aid, too, Hoyt said.

The federal government also provides fee waivers, from the full amount to half for certain low-income individuals. A family of four would have to make about \$36,500 to qualify for one of those waivers, for example.

Rising national backlog

The applicants have already been vetted and qualified for legal permanent residency and have waited the generally required five years to apply for naturalization. They study U.S. history and must pass a civics test as part of the naturalization process.

They also must be able to read, write and speak basic English, with some exceptions for those of advanced age. People 50 or older who have lived as a permanent resident in the U.S. for 20 years are exempt from the basic English test. Those 55 or older who have lived as a permanent resident here for 15 years are also exempt.

That may suit Rojas, who attended a Catholic Charities citizenship class taught in Spanish.

Guadalupe Tirado told her to go for it. At the citizenship class, the tall granddaughter watched her stooped abuela plow through the government documents with her 2001-issued green card in front of her.

Like so many immigrants before her, Rojas spoke of the immigrant mantra that pushed her to seek a life in Texas, and now finally U.S. citizenship. “*Para una vida mejor,*” to have a better life.



The Rev. Luis Gerardo Arraiza of Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church encourages church members to apply for citizenship while standing next to Socorro Perales (center) and Xochi Guerra from Dallas Area Interfaith after Sunday services on Dec. 17, 2017. (Rex C. Curry/Special Contributor)



Auxiliary Bishop Greg Kelly of the Catholic Diocese of Dallas. (Andy Jacobsohn/Staff Photographer)