



Supporting Citizenship: An Opportunity for State and Local Governments July 2018

The Goal

Naturalization is the process most immigrants must complete to become U.S. citizens. To be eligible to naturalize, an immigrant must have lawful permanent resident (LPR) status, also known as a “green card,” be at least 18 years old, meet durational residency requirements in the U.S., demonstrate good moral character and knowledge of English and U.S. civics as well as an attachment to the principles of the U.S. constitution, and take an oath of allegiance to the United States. The naturalization process involves submitting a 20-page application form, paying a \$725 fee, passing an English and civics exam, undergoing background checks and a review of one’s entire immigration history, and completing an interview with the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). The final step in the process is the naturalization oath, after which an immigrant becomes a U.S. citizen.

Achieving U.S. citizenship is a milestone for immigrant civic integration, engagement, and full participation in communities where immigrants live, work, and raise their families. Citizenship delivers new economic prospects and security in belonging that are the firm ground from which new Americans can engage.

- Naturalized U.S. citizens can vote in all elections that directly impact the lives of communities. Only U.S. citizens can run for federal elected office. Without naturalization, immigrant communities remain disenfranchised.
- Naturalization has economic benefits for the country as a whole, as New Americans are more likely to start businesses than their U.S.-born counterparts. Naturalized citizens have access to better jobs with higher earnings and have higher rates of home ownership than lawful permanent residents. Research has shown that U.S. citizens earn more than LPRs. [Citizen Gain](#), published by the Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration at the University of Southern California (2012), found that citizenship alone can boost individual earnings by 8 to 11%. This increased spending power improves economic participation, with micro- and macro-economic impact.
- U.S. citizen families are more stable. Citizens can reunite their families more easily than LPRs through family petitions. Unlike LPRs, they can petition for their parents to immigrate without the numerical limitations that cause long wait times, and can file petitions for their married children, and their brothers and sisters.
- U.S. citizens can travel freely with the protection of a U.S. passport and remain outside the U.S. for unlimited amounts of time or even make their home outside the U.S., whereas LPRs who leave the U.S. could risk losing their residency and not being able to return. They cannot be deported or lose the right to live in the U.S. Citizenship conveys the power that comes with the security of knowing one is here to stay.

The Challenge

There are currently nearly 9 million LPRs across the United States who qualify for citizenship.¹ Of those, approximately 10 percent apply for citizenship each year. At the same time, approximately another million become newly eligible. State, county, metropolitan area, and PUMA level data are available from interactive maps.² Financial barriers (real and perceived), language barriers, the need for affordable legal help, and an overwhelming lack of knowledge about the naturalization process persist.

The Opportunity

We invite state and local governments to help remove these barriers by reaching, mobilizing, and supporting services for LPRs. For these individuals and our communities, the impact is profound and the benefits are lifelong. Naturalized and engaged immigrants strengthen our country, ensure its diversity, and contribute to a vibrant, representative, and engaged civil society.

¹ U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Estimates of the Lawful Permanent Resident Population in the United States: January 2014. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, June 2017. Available at: https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Lawful_Permanent_Residents_2014.pdf.

² See: <http://newamericanscampaign.org/policy-makers/naturalization-data/>. Maps are by the Center for Migration Studies of New York, and the Center for the Study of Immigration Integration at the University of Southern California.



The [New Americans Campaign](#) believes state and local governments have a crucial role to play and a unique opportunity to support eligible LPRs in becoming United States citizens. As a campaign, our goal is to mobilize as many LPRs as possible to apply for naturalization and to help these LPRs with the naturalization process. This is an important moment to focus on naturalization. Backlogs in naturalization application processing are such that the processing time for new naturalization applications (N-400 applications) by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has increased since 2016 from five to six months to more than a year, and up to 21 months,³ from receipt through the oath ceremony conferring citizenship. Immigrants motivated to naturalize deserve our help.

The Crucial Role of State and Local Governments⁴

Governors, county leaders, and mayors can lead the way in **funding for naturalization services**. States such as California, Illinois, Massachusetts, New York, and Washington, and local jurisdictions such as San Francisco and Washington D.C., have appropriated funds to provide grants to organizations that offer naturalization assistance to lawful permanent residents who are eligible to become citizens. Services may include education and outreach, application completion, legal screening and counseling, document review, and interview preparation. Some jurisdictions also fund English and civics preparation for the naturalization examination. The New Americans Campaign can make available model law language.

Government leaders can also create a **fund or scholarship program** to help citizenship applicants who do not qualify for a fee waiver or reduced fee afford the USCIS fee. In January 2018, the Stanford Immigration Policy Lab (IPL) published [new research](#) on the financial barriers low-income immigrants face to becoming citizens. [NaturalizeNY](#), a public-private partnership of the New York State Office for New Americans and local philanthropy, found that providing a fee voucher to cover the full cost of the \$725 application doubled the application rate for low-income New Yorkers. The program offers a model for communities large and small that want to help immigrants to become citizens. Cities such as [San Francisco and San Jose](#) California, and counties such as Montgomery County, Maryland,⁵ have also provided grants and scholarships to fund the application fee.

Partnerships with local government can generate significant increases in the number of eligible lawful permanent residents (LPRs) who apply to become U.S. citizens. Pending changes to the public charge⁵ rule threatens immigrants' use of vital government benefits such as health and nutrition programs. Promoting U.S. citizenship will bolster community wellness and enrollment in government programs. **Human Services Agencies** can engage in targeted outreach to immigrants in their databases to achieve vast turnout at naturalization application assistance workshops, greater applicant preparation, streamlined evidence of fee waiver eligibility to cover the \$725 application, and access to a hard to reach population less likely to naturalize. A [case study](#) of the New Americans Campaign's partnership with human services agencies in three San Francisco Bay Area counties provides a roadmap for similar partnerships nationwide.

Government may also **engage the library system** in promoting citizenship. As trusted institutions, libraries provide ideal locations to access citizenship services. A [partnership](#) between USCIS and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) aims to increase access to citizenship resources in the 9000 libraries across the country. Libraries may hold information sessions or naturalization workshops as the [Dallas Public Library](#) does regularly. Libraries may encourage patrons to use the free online tool [Citizenshipworks](#) to complete the citizenship application in a library computer lab as the [Brooklyn Public Library](#) has done. Libraries may also set up a [Citizenship Corner](#) at all branch libraries, like in [San Jose, California](#) or a [New American Center](#) with free application assistance by accredited staff, like in Los Angeles. Libraries may

³ See <https://egov.uscis.gov/processing-times/>. See also Naturalization Fact Sheet and Houston Case Study (Oct. 2017), available at: <http://newamericanscampaign.org/policy-makers/naturalization-data/>.

⁴ Initiatives to engage state and local government in supporting citizenship and immigrant integration include [Welcoming America](#), [Cities for Citizenship](#), and [New American Economy](#). These initiatives offer a wealth of resources to government considering the best way to engage.

⁵ For the first time in two decades, the federal government intends to use the "public charge" rule against immigrants who use certain means-tested benefits to support the well-being of their families. Although immigration laws give the federal government the right to exclude some people from immigrating to the United States on the ground that they are likely to be a "public charge," long-standing policies (dating back to 1999) restrict using this rule to penalize immigrants who access essential, non-cash government programs for eligible family members, such as health care and nutrition programs.



partner with legal non-profits and provide workshop volunteers. Libraries may host citizenship preparation classes and refer students to the [New Americans Campaign](#) for help completing their naturalization application.

Airport commissions may play a role. In May 2018, the Port of Seattle Commission passed a [resolution](#) to engage in the New Americans Campaign's [Red, White & Blue: Time for Citizenship](#) initiative. The resolution includes posting signage at strategic places throughout Sea-Tac Airport encouraging eligible LPRs to apply for U.S. citizenship and hosting an on-site citizenship clinic for airport employees and local residents who are LPRs. Equally creative initiatives are afoot at airports such as Atlanta and San Jose.

Government leaders may urge the city or county to **provide venues for naturalization assistance workshops**. Examples abound and range from offering a venue to waiving fees in order to allow local non-profits to secure a venue. In Jersey City, the Mayor's Office provides the space for a naturalization workshop at City Hall. In Miami, to support a naturalization mega workshop at Marlins Stadium, Miami Dade County agreed to waive the police and fire fee for the event. Cities and counties may also sponsor food for naturalization workshop volunteers.

Local government leaders can provide the impetus for **creative partnerships to promote naturalization**. The City of Azusa, California, promoted an upcoming citizenship workshop through a utility bill insert. Similarly, information about naturalization could be included in property tax bills (mail or online) or at the department of motor vehicles. Cities and counties can help with volunteer recruitment and engagement and promote naturalization to local government employees who are LPRs. Local government can secure local media promotion for naturalization, place advertisements on buses or other public transportation, or publicize events through social media. Elected officials can sponsor or promote events and serve as spokespersons for the importance of naturalization. They may even host a naturalization event, and provide food for volunteers and logistical support. Elected officials can also partner with non-profit organizations to provide on-site naturalization assistance appointments at their offices, as New York City Council members do. Some cities have created formal [Citizenship Outreach Partnerships](#) with USCIS.

To support these and other partnerships, state and local government could create and lead a **task force of public agencies** (public libraries, school systems, human services agencies, election boards or commissions, airport commissions, city or county councils, etc.) focused on promoting and supporting access to citizenship. Joint efforts could include a cross-agency program of "100 Naturalization Ambassadors" trained on the naturalization application process who can direct LPRs to resources that will help them achieve citizenship.

State and local government staff designated to work on immigrant integration can **identify and work with existing non-profit naturalization collaborations**, including through the [New Americans Campaign](#), find opportunities for these efforts to align with government priorities, and serve as a liaison with the non-profits and to other departments within the government. Joint efforts range from having a formalized Memorandum of Understanding, as the City of Houston does with the local non-profits engaged in naturalization, to regularly attending the New Americans Campaign collaborative meetings, as both the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs and the State Office of New Americans do in New York.

Finally, state and local government leaders may **celebrate citizenship** by proclaiming an annual naturalization day or month, or even a year of naturalization, and focus resources on promoting citizenship during that period. Opportunities to celebrate citizenship include recognizing volunteers who made exceptional contributions to helping LPRs become U.S. citizens, and organizing public events that acknowledge the contributions of naturalized Americans in the community.

About the New Americans Campaign

Led by the Immigrant Legal Resource Center, the New Americans Campaign is a diverse nonpartisan national network of respected immigration organizations, legal services providers, faith-based organizations, immigrant rights groups, foundations and community leaders. The Campaign transforms the way aspiring citizens navigate the path to becoming new Americans. It is committed to connecting lawful permanent residents (LPRs) to trusted legal assistance and critical information that simplifies the naturalization process. Throughout the United States the Campaign has 21 collaborations of local non-profits that provide naturalization services in a metropolitan area or region, and over a dozen affiliates. We house Campaign stories, data, evaluation reports, and information at <http://newamericanscampaign.org/>.