

After days of behind-the-scenes
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Business is booming at INS offices

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Business is brisk at the Salinas Legalization Center, where thousands of illegal aliens have come forth to apply for amnesty and special worker programs.

Immigration and Naturalization Service officials said this morning the situation is different from a couple of months ago when illegals seemed to be avoiding the office.

Terry Rice, the supervisor of the center, said office workers are interviewing an average of 150 people a day. He said most of the people come from the Pajaro Valley, particularly Watsonville.

Rice said so far the Salinas Center had accepted 7,500 applications and interviewed 4,400 applicants.

"At first things were slow," Rice said. "Now, everything is coming in at a steady pace. ... I guess people were gearing up for this, testing the waters at first to see if it was safe."

Legalization officials repeatedly warned that illegals were shy about dealing directly with them because of the INS's other job of finding and deporting illegal aliens.

Rice said the influx of applications has been so great, the center is no longer conducting interviews on the same day applications are submitted.

Same-day services were canceled after the center began experiencing long lines of applicants. Many waited all day for interviews, Rice said.

Pat Arnold, the manager of Ag-Help, a program operated by farming interests to help illegals apply for the agricultural worker and amnesty programs, said things were hopping.

Both programs were established by the Immigration Reform and Control Act. The amnesty program application period is scheduled to last one year, and applicants are required to prove they have lived continuously in the United States since 1982.

The Special Agricultural Worker program application period will run for 18 months, and applicants are required to prove they have worked at least 90 days in perishable crops since May 1986.

"Business has been booming,

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although we have seen a little bit of slack in the last week," Arnold said. "I guess so far we have started about 700 applications and completed about 300. ... Things have perked up as we learned what we were doing and how to do it."

She said the fear farm workers had about dealing with the INS is being overcome as word travels over the grapevine that it is safe to deal with the legalization centers.

"I understand that people had been sleeping outside and lining up outside the immigration center in Salinas and they had to put a stop to it," she said.