

Program starts today for Illegal aliens in farm work

A program offering legal status to thousands of undocumented workers began today as the second part of the new federal immigration reforms went into effect.

The program is called the Special Agricultural Worker (SAW) program and offers legal status to illegal aliens employed in agricultural work.

Area Immigration and Naturalization officials and local social-service workers believe the new program will bring more response from illegals who reside in the Pajaro Valley than the recently instituted amnesty program.

The amnesty program began May 5 and offers legalization to persons who can prove they have lived in the United States continuously since January 1982.

Illegals have one year to apply under that program.

Cruz Gomez, the director of the Migrant Media and Education Project, said it's easier to qualify under the SAW program.

Under SAW, undocumented agricultural workers must either prove they have resided in the United States for at least 90 days over a three-year period (1983-86) or for 90 days during 1985-86.

Illegals have 18 months to qualify under the SAW designation.

Tom Maddry, chief legalization officer for the INS office in Salinas, said the SAW program will bring more applications into his office because most of the illegals in the Pajaro and Salinas valleys are employed in

agricultural work.

He said so far only 142 applications have been filed at his office under the amnesty program. He said nearly 18,000 applications have been distributed and he suspects most are for the SAW program.

Estimates of how many illegal workers there are in the area ranged from 20,000 to 50,000.

One organization, AG Help, was established by area Farm Bureau branches and local growers specifically to help

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Gomez said she believes 70 to 80 percent of the undocumented workers in the Pajaro Valley qualify under the SAW designation.

agricultural workers and employers with the new SAW program.

AG Help has an office in Salinas and satellite offices are expected to open soon in Watsonville, Hollister, Gilroy and South Monterey County. The phone number for the Salinas office is 758-1211.