

REPORTS & COMMENTS

Immigration

Confusion Welcomes New Citizens to U.S.

THE sweeping Immigration Reform and Control Act has hit Santa Cruz County, but not all of the 5,000 or so undocumented residents here are overjoyed with the news.

Despite the fact that thousands of Hispanics have finally reached the end of their rainbow, the controversial law is being met with confusion, skepticism and paranoia.

Although local news reports have noted that very few applicants have been showing up at the nearest immigration center in Salinas, local response to the legalization stipulations has been tremendous, 6,000 undocumented residents have appeared at information clinics sponsored by a variety of local agencies, which as of this week have banded together to form the brand new Santa Cruz Immigration Project.

The project has been set up to aid the thousands of potential new citizens as well as those left out in the cold as a result of the new law.

"There is a lot of misinformation and confusion surrounding the law, and we are trying to sort it all out for the people," said Cruz Gomez, director of the Migrant Media Project.

"We expect 95 percent of the local applicants to qualify and be accepted," Gomez said. "But it's a tedious process because of all the documentation required (to become eligible for citizenship). We are having a lot of problems with letters of recommendation from growers not being specific about dates. Some have already decided to go back to Mexico, and some growers are complaining that they can't obtain criteria to eventually gain legal U.S. citizenship status."

However, the compromised legislation contains employer sanctions and increased border patrol terms that have already resulted in border crackdowns and acute forms of discrimination against migrant laborers, according to local human rights activists.

"It's true that several thousand local immigrants, mostly farmworkers from Mexico, will benefit from the law by getting their legal papers," said Jon Silver, a volunteer at the Migrant Media Education Project (a social service agency that has been coordinating a series of information clinics for prospective residency applicants).

"But overall it's a disastrous law," Silver said. "Even the good parts have harmful aspects and the bad parts come down even harder than before on undocumented citizens."

The liberal aspect of the law, dubbed the amnesty program, is designed to give two categories of presently illegal immigrants a chance to become full-fledged citizens.

One eligible group includes people who can prove they have been residing in this country since Jan. 1, 1982.



North Coast resident Reynalda Guerero (right) is helped through the mountain of citizenship application paperwork by John Silver, Amy Weiss (sitting) and Deborah Levin.

Another category are those with proof they worked in the fields for at least 90 days between May 1985 and May 1986.

There are, however, drawbacks to both legalization plans. The cost to file an application is \$185 per person, regardless of how many people are in

a family. There are 30 exclusions, including being convicted of a felony or two misdemeanors or being mentally ill, for which eligibility is denied. And applicants must go through a two-step process, gaining full citizenship only after an 18-month temporary status.

As a trade-off for the amnesty portion of the act, the law contains a pair of "get tough" measures. Employers are now required to check the identification of workers, and theoretically are not allowed to hire illegal aliens (according to the law, only documented persons or those qualifying for the new legalization can be hired). Violators can be hit with a \$250 fine or six months in jail. Also, the federal "border patrol" budget has been increased by 50 percent.

"Enforcement of employer sanctions doesn't have any teeth, and I

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doubt growers are worried about being fined," said Silver, who sits on the joint Immigration and Naturalization Service task force, a local watchdog group formed to monitor human rights abuses committed by the Immigration Service.

"But just having the sanctions gives employers an excuse to discriminate. Some will now be able to pay illegals \$2 an hour and claim that they are taking a risk by hiring them at all. U.S. Attorney General Ed Meese, that champion of civil rights, is setting up the division that will handle complaints against growers." •

—Kevin Hanson