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# Immigrants applying for citizenship in Houston face high wait times

Natalie Weber, Staff writer

Updated: Aug. 16, 2019 10:39 p.m.



From left, Martin Alvarez, Gissel Alvarez, Altagracia Castaneda and Anabel Castaneda at prepare for dinner at their home in Katy, Friday, Aug. 9, 2019. Anabel received her citizenship in 2008 and her husband Martin and mother Altagracia will take the test later this month. Martin's friends and family members urged him to reapply for his citizenship after failing his first

When Martín Alvarez and his mother-in-law, Altagracia Castaneda, found out their citizenship applications had been processed, and their interviews were scheduled near the end of August, they were pleasantly surprised.

"I thought it was going to take longer," Castaneda said in Spanish. "They said it was going to take a lot of time, and it could take up to two years. But it was one year."

National average processing times for citizenship have increased by 80 percent since fiscal year 2016: going from 5.6 months in that fiscal year, to 10.1 months as of March 2019. But in Houston, the median wait time is 14 months, and processing can take up to 25 months.



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Naturalization applications spiked in 2016 and 2017, according to a report by Boundless Immigration, a Seattle-based technology company that helps immigrants obtain green cards and citizenship. However, the report said, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services — the government agency that oversees naturalization — has the lowest processing efficiency in a decade.

## Why there's a backlog

"What we're seeing in the Trump years is you get this surge in volume and then the processing stays well below that," said Doug Rand, co-founder of Boundless Immigration.

Houston had the highest median processing times and the third-lowest backlog completion rate when compared with 86 other U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services field offices, the company's analysis found.

Rand said there doesn't seem to be a clear reason why certain field offices have higher wait times than others — it's not based on an urban-rural divide, he said, or the political leanings of a certain area.

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"It may just be arbitrary," he said.

Citizenship and Immigration Services spokeswoman Jessica Collins has an answer for the longer wait times: They are due to the number of applicants.

"The truth is that while many factors relating to an individual's case can affect processing times, waits are often due to higher application rates rather than slow processing," she said. "That is why

USCIS has implemented a range of process and operational reforms, hired additional staff and expanded its facilities to ensure its ability to adjudicate keeps pace with extraordinary demand for its services over recent years.

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The agency strives to process applications as effectively and efficiently as possible while following laws, policies and regulations, she said.

Emma Ibarra, who serves as the American Immigration Lawyers Association liaison for the Houston field office, also said the high wait times are a result of an increased workload. The Houston field office alone serves 30 Texas counties.

"They basically have the same (amount) of officers, just handling way more applications," Ibarra said.

As the local field office works through the backlog, it is working to hire more officers and cross-train employees so they can handle various types of immigration cases, Ibarra said.

### Anxiety in waiting

Castaneda and Alvarez said waiting for their applications to be processed did not cause them a lot of anxiety. However, they have both said they will feel more secure in this country if they pass their citizenship exams and are [approved for naturalization](#).

"I have various family members and they motivated me (to apply)," Alvarez, who is from Mexico, said in Spanish. "And at the same time, they pressured me, because they said that 'Look, residents don't have the same advantages as being a citizen, because being a resident, you don't have anything certain in this country.'"

Castaneda said while she waited for her citizenship application to be processed, she delayed plans to visit two of her children, who live in Mexico.

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"I had plans to travel," she said in Spanish. "But I said 'If the call to go answer the questions arrives, I can't go. I have to wait to be able to carry out everything that I've been hoping for.'"

This isn't the first time Citizenship and Immigration Services has seen a spike in applications — in 2007, almost 1.4 million petitions were filed, and by the following year, it had adjudicated more than 1.1 million cases.

In addition to impacting travel plans, waiting for citizenship can have negative effects on people who can't receive certain medical benefits unless they are naturalized, Ibarra said.

"The long processing time causes them great hardship," she said.

It can also impact social service organizations' ability to advise new immigration cases, Jill Campbell, managing immigration attorney at BakerRipley said.

"Having a pending application can create some anxiety," she said. "It also puts a strain on nonprofits."

## Other challenges

While wait times have gone up, it's not the only challenge some immigrants may face while applying for citizenship, advocates said.

To become a citizen, a person must pass a civics test and a basic English test during their citizenship interview. However, if a person is 50 or older and has been a permanent resident for at least 20 years, or 55 or older, and a permanent resident for at least 15 years, they are exempt from the English language requirement, and may take the civics test in their native language, using a translator.

As a result, some immigrants may wait to apply for citizenship.



“That is the biggest reason why I don’t see some people apply sooner,” Ibarra said.

Both Alvarez and Castaneda said one of the reasons they delayed getting their citizenship was to become eligible to have the English requirement waived. Alvarez applied for citizenship in 2007, but failed his exam which was in English.

“In my country, in my state, in my town, I wasn’t able to study, and with work, I was barely able to write Spanish,” he said. “It was very difficult for me to write the sentences in English. So, for this reason, I failed the citizenship exam, and I got discouraged.”

“Socioeconomics play an important role in how people can go through this process,” said Benito Juarez, who works in Houston’s Office of New Americans and Immigrant Communities. “For example, if you have an immigrant that came here and has a good job and was able to immediately learn the language or they already knew the language, it’s a lot easier.”

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Gordon Quan, a Houston-based immigration attorney, said he’s also noticed an increased scrutiny of applications, which he said may contribute to longer wait times.

“In the past, we just looked at a good moral character for the last five years, if it was a normal case,” he said.

As a result, some people seeking citizenship may find their green cards jeopardized, Quan said.

“Now, if they find that anything has been done before that, that somewhat would disqualify a person, they’re going back onto those cases and trying to even revoke the person’s permanent resident visa,” he said.

Prospective citizens also face the challenge of paying for the application fees, which cost \$725 per person.

Since his youth, Alvarez earned a living by painting cars, but the chemicals damaged his skin, and he is only able to work odd jobs from time to time. He and his wife rely on her job as a teacher to pay their bills and save enough funds for his application fee. Castaneda said her children helped her pay her fee.

“I work every now and then, but it’s not a salary, a check that I bring to my house like I brought before, when I was able to work the entire week,” he said. “So, that is part of the reason why it took me a little longer.”

### Uneven workload

While Citizenship and Immigration Services is still working through a backlog of applications, it said it will realign its regional, district and field offices as part of its efforts to redistribute the workload.

By October 2019, the agency plans to realign its field offices under 16 district offices, instead of the current 24. There hasn’t been a reorganization since 2006, which has caused the workload across the country to become uneven.

The organization also plans to use overtime, technology and redistribution of staff workloads to address the backlog. In fiscal year 2018, Citizenship and Immigration Services increased its staff by almost 1,300 positions — a 7 percent increase over staffing in fiscal year 2017. For fiscal year 2019, it has authorized an additional 884 positions.

The caseload “skyrocketed under the Obama administration” more than doubling from 291,800 in September 2010 to nearly 700,000 by the beginning of 2017, said USCIS spokeswoman Jessica Collins.

“Despite a large workload, USCIS is completing more citizenship applications, more efficiently and effectively—outperforming itself as an agency,” she said.

As an example, she cited FY 2018 rates, saying the agency “exceeded a five-year high in both new oaths of citizenship and the number of applications processed.”

While aspiring citizens may face certain barriers in the application process, there are people willing to help them along the way.

“We’re here to overcome them,” Campbell, the managing immigration attorney for BakerRipley, said of the obstacles.

Bonding Against Adversity, another nonprofit group in Houston working to assist immigrants, helps people apply for citizenship. Earlier this month, Castaneda and Alvarez practiced for their exam during a citizenship class hosted by the organization.

Gloria Villarreal, a Mexican mother of two who became a citizen in July 2018, was also attending the class. But now she volunteers with Bonding Against Adversity, and offers encouragement to people as they go through the process she completed not too long ago.

“I really like to motivate them. I always give advice,” she said. “Are you scared? Perfect. I was too. But it’s normal, no?”

Juan Figueroa contributed to this report.

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