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Cost of green cards may triple

By Danielle Ameden

Tripling the cost of applying for a “green card” won’t stop immigrants who are hungry for the American Dream.

That will just make them work three times harder to get one, MetroWest and Milford area immigration advocates and lawyers say.

Those advocates yesterday called the government’s new proposed application fee increase “unfair” but bearable for hard-working people who aspire to take steps toward citizenship.

“It’s a question of short-term sacrifice for a long term investment,” said Kevin O’Connor of Framingham Adult English as a Second Language Plus. The organization offers free citizenship classes to immigrants.

“It’ll be a hardship that people will willingly endure,” he said.

Under the proposal from the Department of Homeland Security’s Citizenship and Immigration Service, applying for a green card and permanent legal resident status would jump from \$325 to \$905. Processing a citizenship application would cost \$595, up from the current \$330. The fees are slated to jump in June, according to a press release posted this week on the service’s Web site.

The extra dollars demanded are “a lot for people making minimum wage,” said Milford immigration lawyer James Hentz, who gets two or three calls a week at his Main Street practice about green card and citizenship proceedings.

“It’s going to be harder for people to come with the money,” he said. “I think it’s going cost-prohibitive.”

While affordability of the increased fees poses a concern, attorneys say most immigrants seeking new legal status will find the money.

Framingham-based immigration lawyer Peter J. Cramer said the issue boils down to the simple economics concept of supply and demand.

“People have to come up with the money,” said Cramer, who handles about 60 green cards and 12 citizenship applications last year. “Whatever it costs, they’re going to pay it because they don’t have a choice.”

“It’s going to be tough for a lot of people,” he said. “They’re not making a lot of money but they’re highly motivated to get the benefits.”

While \$580 more for a green card seems tough to swallow, the extra cash is modest compared to what immigrants pay for lawyer fee, fines and adjudication costs, O’Connor said.

“Most people are paying between \$2,000 and \$3,000 just to have the process begin,” said O’Connor, an ESL teacher and assessment specialist at his Framingham program.

The application fee increase will not stop legal U.S immigrants from paying to officially put down roots, he said.

“It’s not really a choice,” said O’Connor, whose mother immigrated from County Kerry, Ireland. “I don’t see (the fee increase) being a barrier to people as far as (their) will, but I know it’s harder to put together an extra \$400.”

The government agency promises the fee increase will digitize and speed up the process of obtaining the legal documents, quickening by 20 percent before the end of fiscal 2009, according to a release. Processing would also be faster because of additional staffing.

Applicants would not need to endure the extra cost of \$180 temporary work permits and \$170 travel permission fees so in the end, the larger application fee hike “may not be as bad as it sounds at first,” Cramer said.

O’Connor agreed.

“People have already invested this much in the process,” he said. “They won’t be happy about the increased fee, but they’ll shrug and think if this is the end of the road, it’s worth paying that much more.”