

# Rush on to beat Monday's sharp increase in immigration fees

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In the past few weeks, Naples immigration attorney Casey Wolff has scrambled to help people file for green cards.

And he's collectively saved them thousands of dollars ahead of fee increases that will nearly triple the cost of becoming a permanent resident. The cost is going from \$395 to \$1,010.

The cost of applying for citizenship also will jump from \$400 to \$675, including photos and fingerprinting, and businesses will have to pay \$475 — instead of \$195 — to file a petition for a foreign worker.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services has seen a surge of applications since announcing the new fees, which take effect Monday, July 30.

The fees for nearly all immigration procedures are going up by an average of 66 percent to cover budget shortfalls and reduce backlogs at the immigration agency.

Critics have called the fee increases too harsh, saying they'll put citizenship out of reach for many immigrants and discourage foreign workers from coming here legally to work.

Emilio T. Gonzalez, director of Citizenship and Immigration Services, has said the fee increases are necessary to strengthen the security of the immigration system, improve customer service and modernize business operations.

After finalizing the fees in May, Gonzalez acknowledged they would affect a lot of people.

“There's no way to sugarcoat it, but it's necessary,” he said during a press conference. “We have to balance what's right for the country and what's right for this agency. And also make sure that the people who pay these monies get their money's worth out of it.”

Through May, the federal agency had received 711,538 citizenship applications. That compares to 730,642 for all of last year.

The agency has received 322,261 applications for green cards this year, and could surpass last year's total of 606,425.

Wolff said his Naples law firm, Paulich, Slack & Wolff, has turned people away because it has had so many requests for filings. There are just two attorneys to handle them.

“We are sort of like a hospital emergency room,” Wolff said. “There are certain cases that are deadline and crucial and we just have to put them in front. It’s unfortunate but that is the nature of the business.”

He’s worked evenings and weekends to help people beat the fee hike. In the past two weeks, his firm has sent out about 100 applications.

“The announcement was made more than a month ago,” Wolff said. “But human nature waits until the last minute.”

He worked frantically Saturday to try to get out a few more applications by noon to meet the postal service deadline for Express Mail.

“It’s sad, but tough,” he said. “We’re out of time.”

This past Wednesday, he prepared applications for a family of four to become permanent residents. They would have spent almost \$4,000 more if they hadn’t filed before Monday.

“They are serious contributors to the Naples community,” Wolff said. “These are the people we want.”

The fee increases affect a variety of foreign workers in Southwest Florida, from nurses to construction laborers.

Days before the deadline, Wolff worked on getting green cards for a family of six, whose parents are here legally on professional visas. They’ll save more than \$6,000 by filing before July 30.

Most of the applications Wolff has handled are for families and professionals looking to become permanent residents.

“When you file for a green card, you just don’t file for a green card,” he explained. “You have to pay to get fingerprinted. You have to file for a temporary work card because it takes so long. If you travel, you have to get a special travel document. Every single one of these things is going up.”

On Tuesday, he helped a woman from Germany, who has been sponsored by her husband, a U.S. citizen, file for a green card, with travel and temporary work benefits. Her total filing fees were \$935. As of July 30, she would pay \$2,010. So she’s set to save more than \$1,000.

“That is why the rush is on,” Wolff said. “That is one person. What if children were involved here?”

Even though they're here legally, none of his clients wanted to speak about their personal situations because there has been so much controversy over immigration in Washington, D.C.

"They are just scared," he said.

Immigrants sponsored by employers for green cards are getting a little break on the new fees. They can file and pay the current fees until Aug. 17 because of a bureaucratic mix-up that caused a public outcry last month.

In June, the federal government announced that for the first time in three years all workers could apply for employment-based green cards, paving the way for a long line of immigrants to become permanent residents.

On July 2, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services abruptly reversed that decision, saying the yearly quota for applications had been met. After a public protest, the agency reversed course, saying it would process applications through Aug. 17.

"The human outcry was huge," Wolff said. "So they rescinded that."

Besides filing for green cards, Wolff has worked with local employers to petition for foreign workers before the new rates take effect.

"We've got a very healthy commercial community," he said. "They are still hiring. They have work. They can't find U.S. workers. They don't care whether you are from Maine or Mars. The companies here just need workers."

Naples attorney Otto Immel, a partner in Quarles & Brady's labor and employment practice group in Naples, primarily works for employers. He said companies that had an option to file earlier did so.

"Sometimes the employers don't know if they are going to have a need until later," he said. "Sometimes certain categories of visas run out sooner than others."

He too has been busier than usual ahead of the fee hike.

"There's definitely been a big uptick," he said.

If the fee increases do what they're supposed to do, immigrants will benefit from faster processing times. Some have waited years to get their green cards because there is such a backlog in applications and they've had to pay additional fees to keep their applications alive.

Immel thinks that as long as people have the money, the new fees aren't likely to stop them from becoming permanent residents.

“People are not going to buy other things and that might have an effect elsewhere in the economy,” he said.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services expects the new fees to reduce processing times for all applications by an average of 20 percent by fiscal 2008.

Wolff said he’s not convinced the new fees will bring about change.

“I am a ridiculously positive person,” he said. “The problem in our experience has been that increases in budgets have not increased efficiency. But this one is huge.”

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**U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services is raising its fees for nearly all immigration benefits by an average of 66 percent. Below is a chart listing the old and new fees for some of the most frequently filed applications. The new fees take effect Monday, July 30.**

*The following list is broken down into three categories: form number, current fee, and new fee:*

I-129, nonimmigrant worker; \$190; \$320

I-131, re-entry permit; \$170; \$305

I-140, immigrant worker; \$195; \$475

I-485, adjust status (14 and up); \$395; \$1,010

I-539, extend stay, nonimmigrant; \$200; \$300

I-539, change nonimmigrant status; \$200; \$300

I-765, employment authorization; \$180; \$340

I-824, follow-up on approval; \$200; \$340

N-400, naturalization; \$400; \$675

*Source: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. For more information, visit [www.uscis.gov](http://www.uscis.gov).*