

Advocates say entrance to U.S. is challenging



Patti Zarling, USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin 7:29 p.m. CST December 23, 2015



(Photo: Mike Peters/Press-Gazette Media correspondent)

Green Bay resident Ramon Plascencia mourns the years of his young son's life he missed. He did not attend the now 13-year-old boy's First Communion, several birthdays or his first day of school.

Red tape and government confusion kept the family apart from 2007 to 2010 as Ramon's wife, Teresa Nieves de Plascencia, fought to become a legal U.S. citizen. She and son Kevin Plascencia Nieves stayed with family in her small hometown in Mexico, while Ramon remained in Green Bay, where he worked, saved money and waited for their eventual reunion.

At the time, Ramon was a citizen. Teresa was not. In fact she was an undocumented immigrant, and marriage didn't change that. Nor did it help when she applied for citizenship.

During the application process, she was required to return to Mexico, where she waited for nearly four years as her case slowly moved through the system.

As was the case for the Plascencias, immigration and the path to citizenship is an issue that hits close to home for many Green Bay families. And it remains a top national issue that will feature prominently in next year's presidential election campaigns.

Republican candidates have presented varying ideas about what to do. Most have called for greater border enforcement to keep undocumented workers out, while some support mass deportation and others back paths for illegal workers to become legal or gain citizenship. Front-runner Donald Trump has taken heat for calling Mexican immigrants rapists and robbers.

Democratic candidates have mostly called for a smoother process for gaining citizenship.

Many advocates say immigrants are filling jobs that otherwise would go unfilled, and that many want to become legal citizens.

But experts say the citizenship application process can be long, expensive and unpredictable. There are different rules for those seeking temporary work, those fleeing crimes or violence, and those who are related to a U.S. citizen.

Some families wait up to 20 years to come together, while others may wait a few months. In 2014, nearly 653,000 people became naturalized U.S. citizens, according to the federal Department of Homeland Security. New citizens come most often from Mexico, followed by India, the Philippines, the Dominican Republic and China. Most choose to live in New York, California, Florida and Texas.

Fear of the process

"I know many families who have relatives waiting to become citizens, stuck in Mexico," said Luis Sanchez, Teresa's cousin and a deacon at St. Willebrord Catholic Church in Green Bay. "You have to do the appeal from Mexico, so they are told to go back and apply, and are stuck."

"Families have kids who are 14, 15 and 16 or the kids are in college, and they would rather live undocumented than be separated. People are separated from families for years and years. It causes a lot of suffering."

Waiting lists to become a U.S. citizen are long. In 2013, there were about 13 million "green card" holders, immigrants who can legally live in the United States but are not citizens. About 8.8 million of them were eligible to become citizens, and nearly two-thirds had obtained green cards after the year 2000. Since only about 680,000 people are naturalized each year, the waiting list for citizenship continues to grow.

Another 11 million undocumented immigrants live in the United States. They make up about 3.5 percent of the population and 5.1 percent of the workforce, according to a 2014 study by the Pew Hispanic Center.

The study found the number of undocumented immigrants in Wisconsin has held steady at about 85,000 since 2007. They make up about 1.5 percent of the state's population and nearly 2 percent of its workforce.

Sanchez said the number may have leveled off because jobs disappeared in the wake of the Great Recession and increased fear of deportation.

In the Plascencias' case, Ramon was a citizen and Teresa was undocumented when they met and married. Kevin was a citizen at birth.

In May 2007, the family flew to Mexico so Teresa could appeal for U.S. citizenship, paying a \$560 application fee plus travel costs. Immigration authorities in Ciudad Juarez, a border city connected to El Paso, Texas, reviewed her papers.

"They told me they had to check my case, and after about two hours told me I wouldn't be a resident because, the first time I came, immigration arrested me for 24 hours, and also because I came and lived for years as an illegal," Teresa said through an interpreter. "It was hard for us because we had to be separated. Ramon returned to Green Bay to find work and to find a way for forgiveness so we could be together again."

She was told by immigration authorities she would be unable to "ask for forgiveness and show (she) was a good person," for 10 years. In September 2007, authorities told Teresa she could write a letter asking for forgiveness and then she could return to the United States.

Ramon wrote the letter with help from Sanchez and others at St. Willebrord. The family traveled again to Ciudad Juarez, a 3½-hour bus ride from Teresa's home in Cuquio, a rural town outside of Guadalajara. She again paid a \$560 fee, and then was told she would have to write another letter asking for forgiveness for two things, and to fill out a form explaining her reasons within an hour, which she did not do. The family was told her case was under review and that officials would contact them.

For two years, the family heard nothing. Teresa said her husband became very ill.

"He was sick with depression and sad because he was alone and away from his family," she said. In March of 2010, he was treated for heart disease by a doctor in Mexico.

Altogether, the family appealed five times and spent a total of about \$20,000 in fees, penalties and travel expenses, in order to bring Teresa to the U.S. legally. Letters of recommendation from Sanchez and Green Bay Mayor Jim Schmitt boosted her final appeal, Teresa said. She and Kevin returned in 2010, and he now attends eighth grade at Green Bay's Washington Middle School. They own a home on Irwin Avenue, and Ramon works at the JBS meatpacking plant.

In the end, the family was told the separation was a misunderstanding.

"The guy looked at it and said, 'I don't know why they didn't let you through the first time, I don't see anything here,'" Sanchez said. "Teresa's case was closed several times and no one told them, and then Ramon called and it was reopened. They were sad and alone for no reason. I know so many sad cases."

"So much depends on the person handling the cases, and if the families know people who can help them and have the money to appeal."

Filling unwanted jobs

Immigrants come to Green Bay seeking good jobs and a safe community, advocates say.

Sister Melanie Maczka founded Casa Alba, a resource center for Hispanics in 2012. She has worked with Green Bay's Latino community for decades, noting a huge influx in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

"As the population began to grow, we saw a big increase, not only for families looking for services, but wanting to know how to get kids into school, or if we had legal services," she said. St. Willebrord welcomed Hispanic parishioners and has become a center for that community.

Casa Alba and church staff do not ask if families are documented, she said.

"In many situations, in any given family there may be one member who is legal and the other is not," Maczka said. "Some families are completely documented."

She said undocumented workers often fill jobs that others do not want.

"It's frustrating," Maczka said. "We have to change the whole attitude that people should not be here. We should be giving them the opportunity to be here and work here legally and provide for their families."

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