

Citizenship drive targets California's Asian-Americans

By Susan Valot | June 29th, 2011, 6:30am



Susan

Volunteer attorney Pancy Lin Misa and Sokly Prom, a volunteer for The Cambodian Family, help a new U.S. citizen fill out naturalization paperwork at a June 2011 citizenship drive in Santa Ana.

As the most American of holidays approaches this weekend, several of Southern California's Asian-American groups are targeting a record number of Asian-Americans who live legally in the United States and the number who become citizens. The citizenship drive is taking place in Santa Ana, including one in Santa Ana.

The lobby of The Cambodian Family, a community group in Santa Ana, is a hive of activity. Prospective citizens fill out forms. They help the citizens-to-be fill out forms and explain the U.S. citizenship process in their native language.

The drive is part of a statewide effort to sign on more Asian and Pacific Islander immigrants as U.S. citizens.

Connie Choi is an attorney with the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, the Los Angeles group that's spearheading the drive in various regions throughout California: San Francisco/the Bay Area, San Jose, Sacramento, Fresno, Orange County and L

"We are doing eligibility screening. We're doing actual one-on-one application assistance and so we're helping the applicants by providing in-language services so if anybody has questions about, like what's the entire process, what does that look like, we can provide that kind of answer those questions," says Choi.

Choi points out nearly 3 million Asian-American and Pacific Islanders in the U.S. are eligible to become citizens or them naturalized two years ago, the latest year that figures are available.

Choi says her coalition chose to start its citizenship drive in California because the golden state is home to 5 million Asian population.

"It's a *huge* feat to take on because even within the Asian-American community, there's *so* many different languages and kind of counter that, we've partnered with organizations that are *in* the communities that have the language capacity those communities and allay fears, for example, to partner with us because we really can't do this alone."

Choi says her group hopes partnerships with ethnic organizations will build trust with potential citizens. Many of these repressive governments, so they fear that applying for U.S. citizenship means the government can track and maybe

At the mostly Cambodian language workshop this month in Santa Ana, about 50 people showed up. Some drove from

On the same day, people packed a workshop in Westminster in Vietnamese and an event in Irvine in Chinese and it surprised her.

"There's been such a huge need within the community," Choi says. "And especially when you say, 'We will have, for you to answer questions,' that lifts a huge weight off of people's shoulders, because people are saying, 'OK, well, I can get help from a lawyer's mouth, but actually from attorneys that are experienced with this.' And so the response has been fantastic."

Truoy Vong of Santa Ana, 77, came to the Cambodian Family workshop to get help. He moved to the U.S. from Cambodia but failed the citizenship test. Now he wants to try again.

"Oh I like!" says Vong with a smile before he finishes his thought in his native Khmer language, through a translator. "I live in this country. And that's the reason I want to become a citizen."

That response echoes among many workshop participants who want to apply for citizenship. Chea Lim of The Carlsbad is coming from.

"I was like them," he says, laughing. "I came to America in 1981 and didn't become citizen until 1997. And, you know, we're safe, we don't feel threatened, so we don't have to be involved in a way."

Lim says for him, this citizenship drive is personal.

"We, myself, we came from Cambodia, and if you are aware of the history, you know, there was a communist, the government does not fight democracy," Lim says. "So to be a part of American citizen and can vote, that's power. You know, that's our community to feel like."

He hopes other Asian immigrants throughout the state and beyond will understand, and act upon, that message.

BECOME A KPCC SOURCE

[\(What's this?\)](#)

- What experiences shaped your views on immigration? Tell us.

Comments