

U.S. Citizenship Applications The process of becoming a United States citizen is known as naturalization, and is controlled by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). To become a naturalized citizen, you must first spend a set amount of time as a legal permanent resident of the United States, usually five years. The right to vote, access to programs such as Social Security, a *United States passport*, and the ability to qualify for security clearances are just a few of the advantages enjoyed only by citizens of the United States.

Citizenship is the status given to a legal member of the country. It involves rights, duties and privileges.

United States Citizenship and Immigration Services is a bureau in the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS). It performs many of the functions formerly carried out by the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service, which was part of the Department of Justice.

Eligibility

Basic eligibility requires only that a person has lived as a legal permanent resident in the US for five years, never taken a trip abroad of more than 6 months, and has been physically present in the US for a total of half the entire time--two and half years. Current regulations do allow a person to start the application process ninety days before they fulfill their residency requirement, though ninety percent of applicants fall into the category of the basic case, and need only meet these requirements. However, there are many special circumstances, such as marriage to a US citizen, that might affect your eligibility; fill out the INS online Naturalization Eligibility Worksheet to see how you are affected.

- A period of continuous residence and physical presence in the United States
- The ability to read, write and speak English
- Good moral character
- Knowledge of the principles of the U.S. Constitution
- Favorable disposition towards the United States
- Pass the United States Citizenship Test

Application Checklist

Make sure your application for naturalization includes the following:

- INS Form N-400. Filled out completely and honestly. Two photos. Most camera shops can take these for you--they should not be mounted, be in color, 1 1/2 inches square, and should be taken from an angle to show both your right ear and your face.
- Photocopy of your Green Card. Send a photocopy of both sides of your permanent residency card.
- Application Fee. This should be sent as a check. The current N-400 the most recent fee, effective January 15, 1999 was \$225, plus a \$25 fee for fingerprinting.
- Any other required documents. If you have any special circumstances, you will need to send other documents, specified by the INS.

Naturalization is not a fast process, even if we don't consider the amount of time you must spend as a permanent resident. In the common basic case, however, the process is not complicated. Many people can and do succeed on their own. However, if you are having problems understanding the requirements or the process, or if you have a complicated case, you may want to consider using an immigration lawyer.

Incomplete information will delay the processing of your application, so double check that everything is filled out. Be honest if you are found to be lying your citizenship can be denied, even after you have completed the process. See the checklist below to make sure your application is complete.

Applications must be sent to INS Service Centers, not to local INS offices. To find the Service Center for your area of the country, use the INS state map page.

If your application is complete, the INS will send you an appointment letter for

fingerprinting, follow the instructions on when and where to go for the procedure. You may be contacted afterward by the INS, requesting additional documents.

After the fingerprinting, you will receive a letter telling you where and when to go to your naturalization interview. Be sure to bring any documents requested in the interview letter. The interview covers 3 requirements.....

- English reading, writing, and speaking. You must demonstrate a basic command of the English language.
- Civics test. You will need to answer approximately 20 questions on the history and government of the US. Try the INS self test to see how much you know.
- Questions on your application and background. You will be asked questions about your background and the evidence supporting the application for citizenship, where you live and how long you have lived there, your character, your attachment to the Constitution, and your willingness to take the oath of allegiance to the United States.

Get your decision

Following the interview, your request for citizenship will either be granted, continued, or denied:

- Granted: You may be able to take the oath ceremony the same day. However, it is very common to be notified by mail at a later date. In this case the notification letter will tell you when and where you may take your oath of citizenship.
- Continued: Your application is on hold for the time being. This could be the result of failing one of the tests during the interview, or failing to provide a document the INS requested. The letter of continuation will provide the details of what is wrong, and what you can do to finish the process.
- Denied. If the INS denies your application, they will provide a letter explaining why, and telling you what to do if you would like to appeal the decision. The form to request a hearing on your denial is INS Form N-336.

Oath

You are not a US citizen until you have taken the Oath of Allegiance, swearing allegiance to the United States and renouncing all allegiances to any foreign country. At this time you will return your Permanent Residence Card (Green Card), and pick up your Certificate of Naturalization. You should get a US Passport as soon as possible following the ceremony. If you lose your Certificate of Naturalization, and you do not have a passport, you will have no proof of citizenship until you can get a replacement.