

STATE GOVERNMENT GUIDE TO PROMOTING U.S. CITIZENSHIP AND FACILITATING NATURALIZATION

NEW AMERICANS CAMPAIGN¹

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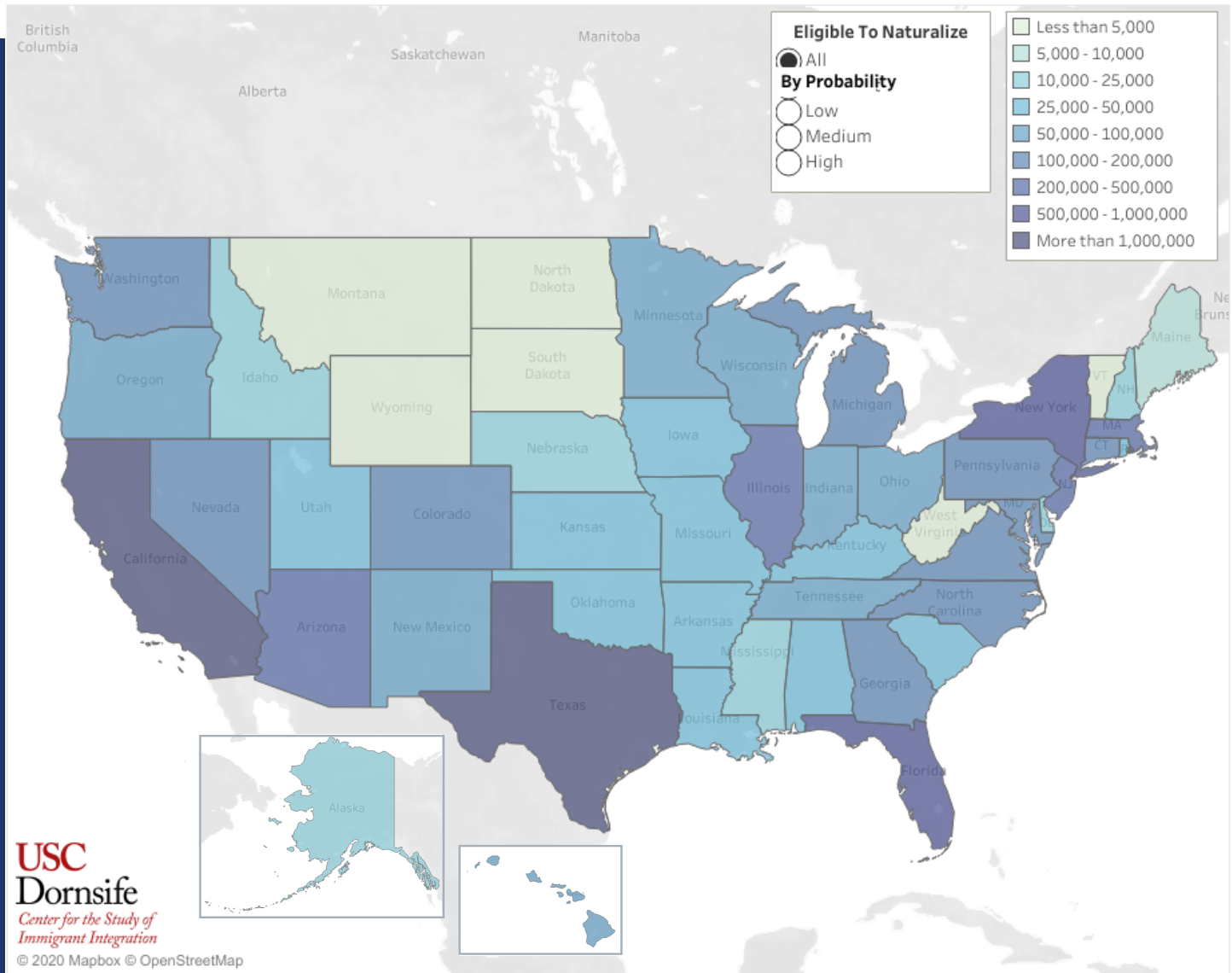
Becoming a United States citizen is a logical and beneficial step for many lawful permanent residents, also known as “green card” holders, who have put down roots and are making a life for themselves and their families in this country. U.S. citizenship opens the doors to opportunity and security that will benefit both these motivated individuals and the communities in which they live and work.

Naturalization is the process by which lawful permanent residents can become U.S. citizens. After 5 years (3 if married to a U.S. citizen) permanent residents can apply to become U.S. citizens by filing an application with the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the N-400 Form, and meeting certain requirements.²

The U.S. is home to 9 million permanent residents eligible to naturalize.³ This guide presents the economic, legislative, and personal benefits of naturalization for aspiring citizens and the communities in which they live; and it offers five ideas for state governments to promote and facilitate naturalization.

ELIGIBLE TO NATURALIZE, BY STATE⁴

Shaded area of map represents total population eligible to naturalize. Probability refers to likelihood of becoming a U.S. citizen through naturalization in the next 2 to 3 years.



BENEFITS OF NATURALIZATION

U.S. citizenship provides significant advantages to individuals who naturalize. When new Americans thrive, it benefits their families as well as the cities, counties, and states in which they live—ultimately helping the country as a whole.

The benefits of naturalization include:⁵

- increased individual earnings and employment gains^{6,7}
- increased city, state, and federal income tax revenue⁸
- increased national aggregate earnings⁹
- increased numbers of immigrant workers in highly skilled jobs¹⁰
- increased homeownership^{11,12}
- decreased poverty rates¹³
- increased financial engagement and investment¹⁴
- increased electoral and civic engagement¹⁵
- increased participation of immigrants on juries¹⁶
- increased immigrant engagement in influential leadership positions including elected office¹⁷
- protection from deportation, leading to greater family security and community stability¹⁸
- secure access to essential government programs¹⁹
- increased opportunities for family unity for those with family members outside the United States²⁰
- constitutional protections for travel outside of the United States borders²¹

An abundance of research demonstrates the positive economic effects of naturalization on both the individual and the public. The research shows that naturalized citizens tend to do better financially than their noncitizen counterparts. The research also concludes that cities, states, and the nation benefit from the naturalization of lawful permanent residents thanks to higher tax receipts and increased rates of self-sufficiency.

Reports on the Economic Benefits of Naturalization

Cities for Citizenship's 2018 report establishes that when municipal leaders develop and invest in naturalization efforts, it produces substantial economic and civic benefits for all of their constituents. Securing citizenship correlates with a higher likelihood of employment, access to higher paying jobs, and home ownership. This delivers important macroeconomic benefits for local communities, including a growth in spending power, higher GDP, and increased tax revenues, all of which can boost local economies. Investing in naturalization also advances financial inclusion for immigrant families who are much more likely to access formal banking services after naturalizing.²²

The **Urban Institute** released a report reviewing data from 21 cities in 2015. The report highlights the economic benefits related to naturalization for the 8.8 million immigrants nationwide that were eligible to naturalize in 2015. Naturalization yields an average individual earning increase of 8.9 percent, an average individual employment increase of 2.2 percent, and an average individual homeownership increase of 6.3 percent. The 21 cities could potentially show a \$5.7 billion increase in earnings and employment gains. "Federal, state, and city income tax and federal payroll would increase by \$2.03 billion in the 21 cities if those eligible to naturalize became citizens."²³

The **National Council of La Raza** (now **UnidosUS**) published a report in 2013 that focused on the Latino community in California. The report describes greater financial engagement among Latinos in California who naturalized than among their noncitizen counterparts, including higher rates of bank account ownership. Latinos who become citizens are also more likely to invest than their noncitizen counterparts.²⁴

The **U.S. Census**, in 2013, analyzed data from the 2011 American Community Survey (ACS) and found that 66% of naturalized U.S. citizen households were owner occupied, compared with only 34% of noncitizen households. Naturalized citizen households were also more likely than non-citizen households to have paid off their mortgage.²⁵

The **University of Southern California Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration** (now **USC Equity Research Institute**) published a report in 2012 focused on the nationwide economic impact of naturalization. After controlling for different variables, the report conservatively estimates that individual earnings after naturalization would rise by 8 to 11 percent. The report estimates that the national aggregate earning increase from naturalization would range from \$21 billion to \$45 billion over the course of a decade.²⁶

The **Migration Policy Institute** published a report in 2012 on *The Economic Value of Citizenship for Immigrants in the United States*, focused on the financial benefits of naturalization. The report shows that naturalized citizens are less likely to be unemployed and more likely to work in highly skilled jobs than noncitizen immigrants. Among other things, the report shows that naturalized citizens earn more on average than noncitizen immigrants.²⁷

The **Economic Policy Institute** published a report in 2010 that also established the positive economic impact of naturalization: "[T]he average income of adult citizen immigrants is 14.6% higher, and the poverty rate 3.0 percentage points lower, than that of adult non-citizen immigrants."²⁸

FIVE WAYS TO PROMOTE AND FACILITATE NATURALIZATION

Many individuals eligible to naturalize do not understand the process or have fears about it. In addition to individual barriers (limited English language skills, uncertainty about requirements and concerns about affordability, fear of anti-immigrant policies),²⁹ systemic barriers such as the rising cost of applying for naturalization³⁰ and securing legal assistance,³¹ insufficient availability of affordable English and civics courses, and long wait times from USCIS backlogs compound the challenges.³² To combat this, state governments with the help of municipalities and trusted NGOs, can promote and fund outreach and services that facilitate naturalization in five strategic ways.

1. Provide funding for naturalization outreach and legal services.

Naturalization outreach and legal services are essential to ensure that eligible permanent residents complete the naturalization process.^{33,34} The complicated application process is, itself, one of the biggest barriers to naturalization and trustworthy, non-profit legal assistance—from an attorney or a Department of Justice accredited representative—makes the process much more seamless.^{35,36,37} One nationally representative poll found that 61% of the respondents had never received any information about how to become a United States citizen, demonstrating a serious information gap.³⁸ Other studies on the impact of outreach found that fee vouchers to cover the cost of applying could increase application rates by 41%,³⁹ or a simple “nudge” on an application form, directing low-income immigrants to fee waivers, could increase the application rate by 35%.⁴⁰

The companion [Model Law](#), based on approaches enacted in California, Illinois, New York, and Washington, is designed to provide funding and direction for promoting naturalization services. The Model Law includes provisions for the creation of a state Office of New Americans, contracting provisions, guidelines for performance measures, and criteria for funding and grantee qualifications. It also includes the option of a state tax credit for the cost of applying for naturalization.⁴¹

2. Provide government assistance for naturalization expenses.

Many individuals do not pursue naturalization because of the high costs associated with the process. The cost of naturalization is high (\$725) and a planned increase to \$1,170 would price out millions of eligible applicants.⁴² At the same time, USCIS would eliminate the possibility of fee waivers for low-income applicants who are applying for citizenship. These changes will have the greatest negative impact on lower-income naturalization applicants, who stand to gain the most from the increases in income associated with citizenship but would be unable to afford to apply. A 2016 report by the University of Southern California Center for the Study of Immigration Integration documented the negative impact of high fees on naturalization, especially among modest-income earners.⁴³ A 2020 report by Cities for Citizenship provides case studies of municipal strategies that could be expanded to provide statewide financial assistance.⁴⁴ Direct financial assistance for the cost of naturalization can help all eligible individuals pursue the naturalization process.

- **Propose a budget allocation to subsidize naturalization application fees.**

Providing financial assistance for addressing the fees associated with the naturalization process would help more individuals be able to afford to become citizens. A state budget line item could fund or subsidize the cost of the naturalization application for eligible individuals. Some local governments are already experimenting with this approach.⁴⁵ The approach may take the form of full or partial scholarships and may be paired with no-interest loans or matching funds from a public-private partnership.

- **Propose a tax credit for naturalization application fees.**

To defray the financial burden of applying for naturalization and increase incentives to apply, a state tax credit for the application fee could be an effective tool and lead to increased naturalization rates. States may also want to explore the option of a tax deduction.

- **Create government funded loans for naturalization expenses.**

A government-funded, low-interest-rate loan program for the citizenship application fees would help individuals bear the costs of naturalization. A government-funded loan program could make the citizenship process affordable for more people because loan repayments could replenish available funding.⁴⁶

- **Create tax incentives for businesses to invest in supporting the naturalization of their employees.**

Tax incentives for businesses to invest in naturalization would promote naturalization among eligible employees. Qualifying activities that facilitate naturalization could include citizenship preparation classes or paid time off to attend citizenship preparation classes and prepare for the naturalization interview.

3. Provide funding for ESL services.

One of the core naturalization requirements is the ability to read, write, and speak basic English. While the overwhelming majority of naturalization applications are approved, the principal denial reason is for failure to pass the English or civics exam, which fewer than 10% of all naturalization interviewees fail.⁴⁷ More importantly, many permanent residents defer applying for naturalization due to insufficient English proficiency skills or lack of confidence in their ability to pass. Restrictions on federal funding for English language learning have resulted in insufficient opportunities to meet demand. Providing funding for ESL programs would help ensure that individuals have access to the tools they need to pass the naturalization interview.

Policy makers can also ensure that government entities, themselves, provide English instruction for adults. Public community colleges, for example, are well-placed to offer English and civics instruction geared to potential naturalization applicants.

4. Increase awareness about the naturalization process and the availability of low-cost legal services for naturalization assistance.

The need for increased awareness of the naturalization process and the services available to individuals pursuing naturalization cannot be overstated. Developing campaigns to promote citizenship and the benefits of becoming a citizen will inform noncitizens where they can receive help with the naturalization process and foster a welcoming community for both noncitizens and citizens, alike.

- **Disseminate naturalization information at state government offices.**

One of the greatest barriers to naturalization is a lack of information about the process. State governments have a significant ability to disseminate information to the public and make noncitizens aware of the resources that are available to help them through the naturalization process. Making resources available and visible in government offices increases public awareness about the benefits of naturalization and informs individuals about nonprofit naturalization legal services. State government can implement dissemination activities directly, require or encourage county agencies to implement dissemination activities, and encourage participation by local government.

- Human services agencies can disseminate naturalization information using their client databases and publicize naturalization assistance workshops organized with local NGOs. A number of county human services agencies have already successfully implemented this approach.⁴⁸ During the COVID-19 pandemic, public health care and food distribution services are particularly well positioned to distribute or display information about naturalization.
- Libraries in many parts of the country already have citizenship corners.⁴⁹ State leadership, along with the state library system, can use its influence to encourage county and city libraries to disseminate information to their residents.
- The state department of veterans affairs can ensure that permanent residents who have served in the military receive proactive outreach about the opportunity to naturalize and the special rules that apply to them, and receive help with the naturalization application.⁵⁰
- Airports provide a unique opportunity for government leaders to connect with eligible lawful permanent residents and promote citizenship. With the help of the “Red, White & Blue: Time for Citizenship” initiative developed by the New Americans Campaign, the Atlanta and Seattle airports now broadcast welcoming PSAs from government leaders. A state governor can record a PSA promoting state and local resources. State port authorities can provide resources and encouragement to their own employees.⁵¹
- States, as well as local counterparts, can also create PSAs for local radio and television, as well as materials for print media and mass transit.

- **Increase training for state employees.**

State governments have many ways to inform and support the interactions of newcomers and established residents to build welcoming communities. Providing government employees with information and training to help immigrants find resources can encourage immigrants to pursue citizenship. Welcoming America and the New Americans Campaign developed a toolkit⁵² and a three-pronged strategy to create immigrant-friendly communities. Receiving states can 1) promote meaningful contact between long-term residents and newcomers; 2) use strategic communications and messaging; and 3) engage state, business, and faith leaders. Being part of a welcoming community can motivate someone to take the final steps towards citizenship.

- **Sponsor naturalization workshops and increase community awareness.**

NGOs regularly organize naturalization workshops run by the nonprofit agencies and volunteers. County and local governments, as exemplified in a San Francisco Bay Area case study,⁵³ have a successful track record of partnering with NGOs to sponsor information and application workshops that help individuals understand the requirements and the process, and get legal help. Government agencies can provide workshop resources including funding, facilities, equipment, volunteers, and publicity. State human services agencies also have access to state databases that can expand outreach. Guest appearances by elected officials and promotion by the state government show immigrant communities that the state is supportive and welcoming, while actively helping members of the community get closer to the goal of becoming U.S. citizens.

- **Outreach in government spaces.**

The state can advertise citizenship initiatives through postings on government websites and social media, press releases, and postings at state government offices. One study found that immigrants are particularly receptive to receiving information from state employees at the Department of Motor Vehicles and at state health exchanges.⁵⁴ Both are state offices where individuals often share foreign identity documents, and trust the information that they receive. Increasing community awareness by advertising citizenship initiatives is an effective way to show that the state fosters a welcoming environment for immigrants.

5. Proclaim and promote a statewide Naturalization Day.

September 17, Constitution Day, is also recognized nationally as Citizenship Day. A great number of naturalization-related activities take place at that time. To galvanize support for naturalization at other times of year, states can proclaim a separate statewide Naturalization Day to promote awareness of naturalization and its benefits. A statewide Naturalization Day conveys the value that the state places on the process of becoming a citizen through naturalization. On both the national Citizenship Day and the statewide Naturalization Day, the government could partner with local NGOs to host events and perform community outreach. Special naturalization oath ceremonies could be scheduled on that day as well.

There are still many barriers preventing lawful permanent residents from becoming U.S. citizens and many opportunities for state governments to help immigrants overcome those hurdles. States, and localities, have the opportunity to include naturalization among the issues that their government relations offices prioritize for advocacy with federal counterparts. The National Conference of State Legislatures, along with the National Association of Counties and the National League of Cities, has the ability to advocate for policies that facilitate naturalization and ensure that the perspective of state government is heard, by submitting public comments on regulations, meeting regularly with federal agency staff, and weighing in on policy proposals. Research and programs on the ground suggest that there is much that state partners can do to reach communities with information, trustworthy legal assistance, financial support, and encouragement. For more information contact:

www.newamericanscampaign.org

END NOTES

1 We thank Logan Byrne, Immigrant Legal Resource Center summer law clerk, for his research and drafting. We also thank Mark Greenberg, Senior Fellow at the Migration Policy Institute and Director of the Human Services Initiative, for his advice.

2 Requirements to become a U.S. citizen (from USCIS):

- (1) Being 18 years of age or older;
- (2) Having authorization to live and work in the U.S. on a permanent basis (informally known as a green card) for at least five years (or three years, if married to a United States citizen);
- (3) Retaining continuous residence in the U.S. for at least five years (or three years, if married to a United States citizen) and being physically present in the U.S. for at least half that time;
- (4) Having the ability to read, write and speak basic English;*
- (5) Having knowledge and understanding of the fundamentals of U.S. history and government;*
- (6) Being a person of "good moral character;" and
- (7) Taking a loyalty oath to the United States and supporting the Constitution and form of government of the United States.

*Some people do not have to speak English at all or answer any questions about United States history and civics, depending on many factors such as their age, time in the U.S. as green card holders, and if they have a disability.

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About the New Americans Campaign

The New Americans Campaign (NAC) is a non-partisan national campaign aimed at increasing the number of new Americans by ensuring access to the naturalization process and trusted legal assistance. The NAC is a network of respected immigration organizations, legal services providers, faith-based organizations, immigrant rights groups, foundations, and community leaders who are modernizing and streamlining access to naturalization services, so that greater numbers of legally qualified permanent residents take the critical step of becoming American citizens.

www.newamericanscampaign.org

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