

## Attorneys offer help to citizenship seekers

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Permanent legal residents had the opportunity to apply for citizenship Saturday afternoon at "Citizenship Rutgers" in the Rutgers Students Center on the College Avenue campus.

Applicants received help completing citizenship applications with identification photos at the free event sponsored by the Eagleton Institute of Politics' Program on Immigration and Democracy, the Rutgers Schools of Law on the Camden and Newark campuses as well as several other organizations.

"There are about 400,000 green-card holders in the state of New Jersey, all who should be voters and are tax payers," said Anastasia Mann, director of Eagleton's Program on Immigration and Democracy. "It's a key part of democracy to make sure people who are here legally get to vote. We want to make that happen."

A total of 91 participants from more than 15 countries like Russia, the Philippines, Sierra Leone and Portugal, attended the event with hopes of obtaining citizenship, she said. One student brought five family members.

Attendees must have held residency in the country for five years — three if they are married and living with a U.S. citizen — provided green cards, passports, proof of address, personal information of children if applicable and history of employment, crime and marriage to be eligible for citizenship, Mann said.

University students from the Camden and Newark campuses observed and assisted professional attorneys with the legal aspects of the citizenship applications, she said.

"We have the language capacity and the skills in the students who are providing an immeasurable service," Mann said. "It's a great example of faculty and students coming together to work on something we're all committed to."

Allan Wernick, a professor at the City University of New York (CUNY) and an immigration attorney, established the original program "Citizenship Now!" in 1997 to address the rising need for citizenship. The program spread throughout New York City and to the University.

Both programs aim to help the government with the naturalization process for immigrants, unify cultures and open up more opportunities for everyone, Wernick said.

"[Gaining U.S. citizenship] would represent becoming part of this American culture because this country has done so much for us. But at the same time, it opens up more doors ... at least for me when I graduate from school," said Alejandro Sanchez, a School of Engineering sophomore, who brought his father to the event.

Volunteers from AmeriCorps and CUNY set up booths along with registration and waiting areas as the applicants were called in numerical order to fill out applications.

Janice Fine, an assistant professor in the University's School of Management and Labor Relations, said gaining citizenship

in the United States used to be easier.

"It has become extremely difficult for low-wage immigrants to emigrate legally to the United States or to legalize their status once they are in the country," she said. "The obstacles to legal immigration are much higher than they were at the turn of the 20th century."

Tim Raphael, director of the Rutgers-Newark Center for Migration and the Global City, said citizenship presents opportunities like the right to vote, applying for better-paying or federal jobs and the ability to run for a government position.

"In New York City, we have many individuals who came to the United States, became permanent residents and are now holding jobs in the State Assembly, the Senate and the City Council," said Wernick, a columnist for the New York Daily News. "So it's the path to empowerment for the immigrant community."

Issues of immigrant labor exploitation and immigration reform are still controversial debates in government, but "Citizenship Rutgers," which will expand to Newark and Camden in the fall, plans to increase the naturalization of legal immigrants in the United States, Wernick said.