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## Immigration: getting in legally takes a long time

*Many have become citizens, while others still wait*

By [Deborah Bulkeley](#)

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HERRIMAN — Immigrating to the United States couldn't have been smoother for Ali Bahadur.

After a simple interview at the U.S. Embassy in Pakistan, he was given a sealed packet to take with him to New York, where he went through customs.

"Within half an hour, I got a (green) card, right there," he said of the identification allowing him to live and work in the United States. "It was so easy."

That was in 1978, when Bahadur moved to the Salt Lake Valley from his native Pakistan. His brother sponsored his green card. During the next two years, Bahadur was able to bring his wife, Parveen, and their four children to the Salt Lake Valley.

But Bahadur, now a U.S. citizen, shakes his head when he hears about how difficult it is to immigrate legally today. A nephew had to wait a decade for permanent residency amid a growing waiting list for a limited number of visas. Security checks are stringent, and interviews more complex.

"It's too long now, it's very hard," he said. "I have two sisters back there, but there's no way for them to get a visa right now."

There are now so many more applicants than available visas that there is currently an 11-year wait to sponsor a sibling for immigration from most countries, according to the State Department's July Visa Bulletin.

U.S. State Department officials say there are more petitions being filed today to sponsor immigrants, but there's no comparison to the 1970s because the numbers and types of visas have changed.



Joe Bongomin, originally from Sudan, carries an American flag while taking the oath of citizenship at Rose Wagner Center in Salt Lake City.

*Laura Seitz, Deseret Morning News*

During the early 1970s, there were separate limits for the Eastern and Western hemispheres, which totaled around 290,000 visas. Then, legislative changes did away with the split and reduced the worldwide limit to 270,000.

Then in 1990 the preference categories were raised to 226,000 for family and 140,000 for employment. Any unused visas can be used the next year.

There is also a limit of how many visas can be allocated to each country. The Philippines has traditionally had one of the longest waits. In July, 1978, the wait was 10 years. Today, it's nearly 23 years. And pending legislation in Congress would make even more changes, but it is debated whether it will cause a bigger backup or alleviate the wait, observers say.

Avelina Staker hopes the 11-year wait won't get even longer. She's recently applied for citizenship and hopes to sponsor her sister's immigration from Venezuela after she's naturalized.

Staker, a student at the LDS Business College, dreams of someday becoming a teacher. Her 4-year-old son is a U.S. citizen. She hopes to be naturalized by the end of the year. It generally takes about six months from the time an application is received to a naturalization service in the Salt Lake region. There are also fees totaling \$400.

If the wait for siblings' visas remains 11 years, her 30-year-old sister, Ana Mercedes, will be 41 years old when her green-card application is processed.

"It's a lot of time to wait," Staker said wistfully. "It's hard, it's really difficult."

### **'Freedom is priceless'**

Lost in the cries to clamp down on illegal immigration is the fact that every year thousands of people immigrate to the United States legally. Some 1.12 million people became permanent residents in 2005. More than half — 649,772 — were sponsored by family members.

Most were in categories that aren't subject to the visa cap: spouses, parents and unmarried minor children. However, other relatives of citizens and permanent residents must generally wait several years. Some categories of employer-sponsored green cards for skilled workers involve a wait of five years, according to the July Visa Bulletin.

Stuart Anderson, executive director of the **National Foundation for American Policy**, a nonprofit think-tank, said the wait to immigrate is long for a simple reason: There aren't enough green cards to meet the demand, even though more visas were added in the mid-1990s.

"There's been an increasing demand for skilled labor," he said. "Starting in the 1980s, you started to see backlogs become significant on the family (reunification) side, on the employment side in the 1990s."

Those who don't have family or employers to sponsor them can participate in the diversity lottery. The lottery hands out up to 55,000 visas each year.

The lottery is closed to countries with high levels of immigration, including Canada and Mexico. This year, more than 5.5 million people applied for one of the visas for fiscal 2007. No one country can receive more than 7 percent of the visas each year, and up to 5,000 are reserved for the Nicaraguan and Central American Relief Act.

Some 3,000 people are naturalized every year in the Salt Lake region, and the top nations of origin for new citizens are Mexico, Bosnia, Vietnam, China and Canada.

On Thursday, some 204 immigrants, including two soldiers, from 56 countries became Americans.

Some had fled their homelands as refugees. Others sought freedom. Some broke into tears as they expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to live in the United States, saying "God bless America."

During the ceremony a woman from Bosnia said she's been waiting for the opportunity to become a citizen for 12 years. A woman from Mexico said U.S. citizenship has been her dream for as long as she can remember. A soldier said, "The freedom I have here is priceless."

A requirement for family-sponsored immigration is proof you can support an immigrant at 125 percent of the poverty level.

That's something that has delayed Murad Karabachian's reunification with his mother, Anaid, who lives in Rio de Janeiro.

Anaid's medical condition requires proof he'll be able to cover her medical bills. It's taking time, he said, to obtain insurance coverage for her and proof of the ability to pay her living and medical expenses.

Karabachian first applied to sponsor his mother's immigration in 2000, and he hopes to be reunited by next Christmas.

"She had to go through 30 medical exams," he said. "They MRI you from head to toe. You need to satisfy all the requirements."

While the lengthy process is sometimes frustrating, Karabachian says there's a "price for everything," and the process hasn't discouraged him.

"I'm a citizen, I'm proud to be a citizen," he said. "My mom even says that's the way to do it. She always says that we should abide by the law ."

Anaid said in a telephone interview that she is eager for a green card so she can be reunited with her son and four grandchildren.

"I miss them, you know," she said. "It is more easy that I come there."

### **Legal vs. illegal**

Immigrants who came here legally have mixed reactions on the debate surrounding illegal immigration. The Senate and the House have each passed bills, but negotiations are stalled for now as the House holds public forums on the Senate bill, which would legalize many of the nation's estimated 12 million illegal immigrants. More hearings are scheduled for August.

Staker is among those who wishes the Senate bill would concentrate less on those who came here illegally and more on making it easier to immigrate legally.

Staker, who migrated from Venezuela, says she's often considered foolish by others in the Latino community who find it very easy to live in the United States illegally.

The only difference between herself and them, she said, is the ability to enter and leave the country at will.

However, while much of the attention over the proposed Senate bill has been over provisions to add new temporary and permanent visa categories, it also adds more visas in existing categories.

It adds 510,000 new employer sponsored green cards each year and raises the number of family-preference visas from 226,000 to 480,000.

Robert Rector, a senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation, said the Senate bill would exacerbate long waits by vastly expanding the number of people who would be seeking visas for themselves or for family members.

"It's going to create another backlog," Rector said. "The more immigrants you bring in, the more pressure for family reunification you're going to have. It's not like you can reduce this backlog by bringing more people in."

But, Anderson, of the National Foundation for American Policy, disagreed with that assessment, saying the bill is meant to reduce backlogs.

"It will more than cut in half the wait times," he said.

Anderson said the way the bill is written, those already in the system would have priority, except perhaps for those who would qualify for a new agricultural worker visa.

"The regularization of people who have been here for five years (illegally) essentially puts them at the back of the pack," he said. "Eventually as their status became regularized, then there will be more requests for family reunification."

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*E-mail: [dbulkeley@desnews.com](mailto:dbulkeley@desnews.com)*