

Hawai'i Immigrants Seek Legal Help to Secure U.S. Citizenship

By [KU'UWEHI HIRAISHI](#) · OCT 8, 2018 – HAWAII PUBLIC RADIO



58-year-old Patricia Wilson held a green card for nearly four decades. She poses here after completing nearly four hours of paperwork necessary to become a U.S. Citizen.
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More than 50,000 immigrants in Hawai'i are eligible to become American citizens but have not yet applied. That's according to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Agency. But the current political climate may be compelling more of them to take on the costly and lengthy task of becoming a citizen. And now, HPR's Ku'uwehi Hiraishi reports, they've got a little help.

For nearly four decades, Patricia Wilson was perfectly content carrying a green card that allowed her to live and work legally in Hawai'i. The 58-year-old immigrated from Tahiti in the early 1980s. But this past Saturday she took her next step toward U.S. Citizenship.

"Because I've been living here long enough to realize that we're lucky to enjoy the freedom that we have here," says Wilson. Freedom that she wants to secure by becoming a

citizen. Wilson was one of 20 Hawai'i immigrants who applied to become U.S. Citizens at a legal clinic held at the First United Methodist Church in Honolulu. Volunteers reviewed piles of documents and completed copious amounts of paperwork. Immigration lawyer John Egan spent his morning there. He oversees the Refugee and Immigration Law Clinic at the William S. Richardson School of Law.

"It's getting kind of hard out there for immigrants and it's definitely in their best interest to get citizenship as soon as they can," says Egan, "It allows them to take all sorts of benefits that wouldn't be available to them. For example, they're eligible to vote. They're eligible to get other sort of public benefits. They can sponsor relatives if they choose to. And you can't be deported."

And that's a big deal. Egan says the national rhetoric surrounding immigration as well as the Trump Administration's unpredictability have immigrants on edge.

"Right at the beginning they started with the Muslim ban, the travel ban. And then just about every week something new comes up," says Egan, "Of course everybody knows about the families who have been separated at the border. People know that the fees have gone up. People also know, for example, we're doing the naturalization application today. The form is 20 pages long. It used to be 8 pages long."

Amy Agbayani helped organize the event. She's with The Legal Clinic, a new non-profit that provides free or low-cost legal services to immigrants. The clinic is one of 17 across the nation supported by the Methodist Church, whose local membership is made up largely of immigrants.



Volunteers from the William S. Richardson School of Law (right) help Hawai'i immigrants navigate the lengthy yet meticulous process of naturalization to become a U.S. Citizen.
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Immigration lawyer John Egan (top left) rummages through paperwork to ensure the correct amount of photo copies are made for all necessary documents.
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A citizenship workshop was held at the First United Methodist Church in Honolulu.
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A volunteer at The Legal Clinic's first Citizenship Workshop sifts through piles of immigration paperwork



More than 50,000 permanent Hawai'i residents are eligible to become American citizens but have not yet applied. The Citizenship Workshop held last Saturday at the First United Methodist Church in Honolulu helped at least 20 of them take that first step.

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