

Exorbitant fees keep many from living their dreams

July 4, 2003, *Houston Chronicle*

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This July 4, as our nation celebrates its freedom and democracy, there are among us those who can only watch from the sidelines. They cannot become citizens because they don't have the money to do so. "Give me your tired, your poor" is no longer our motto.

The rising cost of naturalization is a troubling development in the U.S. citizenship process. In the past decade, naturalization fees have increased nearly 600 percent – from \$50 in 1990 to more than \$300 today. These fees also do not include the cost for fingerprinting – now in the \$50 range – or the money many immigrants pay attorneys to help navigate a confusing immigration bureaucracy.

All told, the cost for an immigrant couple to gain citizenship could total more than \$1,000. This fee may be too high for many of the 18 million legal noncitizens in the country today.

Although many of these "green card" immigrants work and pay taxes, they are denied access to the core of our democracy: the right to vote. Not only can language be a barrier to political incorporation, but many immigrants are also silenced by a lack of electoral clout to lobby officials for changes.

Voting is more than access to representation. It provides accountability of our elected officials and allows constituents to make sweeping reforms through the ballot box. Our nation is ultimately weakened when large blocs of nonvoting constituents do not participate in our democracy.

Becoming an American citizen is not a matter of paying a fee. It's an act that binds and integrates new arrivals into the American system and, in the long run, it makes our nation greater.

Congress should re-examine the exorbitant fees in our citizenship process and help ensure that naturalization is available to all that qualify, not only to those who can afford it. Throughout our history, immigrants have arrived from diverse cultures, developed roots in their communities and eventually pledged their allegiance to this great melting pot of a nation. This July Fourth we must help all those who qualify participate in our democracy. Now that would be something to celebrate.