

## REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE

### Naturalization Services

Chapter 4, Laws of 2015 (ESSB 6052 Section 207 (4))

December 1, 2017

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>BACKGROUND .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>ELIGIBLE POPULATION.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>POPULATION SERVED.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>SERVICES .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>PROGRAM FUNDING.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>PROGRAM DISBURSEMENTS .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>PROGRAM OUTCOMES .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>BARRIERS TO NATURALIZATION.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>SUCCESS STORIES.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>ATTACHMENT A .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>ATTACHMENT B .....</b>	<b>222</b>
<b>ATTACHMENT C .....</b>	<b>23</b>

# Naturalization Services

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Chapter 4, Laws of 2015 (ESSB 6052 Section 207 (4)) requires the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS or the Department) to report to the Legislature annually on all sources of available funding for naturalization services during the current fiscal year, amounts expended to date by service type and funding source, the number of participants served, and program outcome data.

This report covers the most recently completed state fiscal year (SFY) 2017 (July 1, 2016 – June 30, 2017).

### Program Overview

The Office of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance (ORIA) is located within the DSHS, Economic Services Administration, Community Services Division and is designated by the Governor's Office to administer \$25 million in federal and state dollars to more than 60 providers, serving over 8,700<sup>1</sup> refugee and immigrant clients in Washington state annually. ORIA services include refugee cash/medical assistance (RCA/RMA), comprehensive case management, self-sufficiency education, immigration assistance, refugee medical screening and mental health services, employment assistance, English as a second language (ESL), unaccompanied refugee minor foster care, youth educational activities, elderly services and naturalization services.

Naturalization is the process by which the Department of Homeland Security U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) grants U.S. citizenship to a legal immigrant after he or she fulfills the requirements established by Congress in the Immigration and Nationality Act. To qualify for naturalization, an immigrant must be a legal permanent resident (LPR) for five years<sup>2</sup>, have good moral character, and demonstrate knowledge of U.S. Civics and English by passing a written and oral exam.

Washington State law, RCW 74.08A.130 (**Attachment B**), requires DSHS to make an affirmative effort to identify and proactively contact legal immigrants receiving public assistance to facilitate their applications for naturalization. ORIA administers the Naturalization Services Program statewide by contracting with community-based organizations (CBOs), nonprofit legal services organizations and refugee resettlement agencies recognized by the Office of Legal Access Programs (OLAP) in the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ). In the past, the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) administered this recognition. In addition, ORIA collaborates and contracts with the City

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<sup>1</sup> ESA Program Briefing Book 2015 Annual Unduplicated Clients Served report for Refugee and Immigrant Assistance (RIA) 8,787 unduplicated clients for SFY 2015 DSHS Offices (ESA & ALSTA). This count includes clients served by the following ORIA programs: LEP Pathway, Refugee Resettlement Assistance and Naturalization Services.

<sup>2</sup> USCIS 'time in the U.S.' requirement varies among immigrants. Some may naturalize sooner than five years in the U.S.

of Seattle to leverage state and local funds to provide naturalization services in King County.

Immigrants receiving public assistance are eligible for the Naturalization Services Program if they meet the USCIS criteria to apply for U.S. citizenship and will be eligible to naturalize within a year of receiving naturalization services. Clients who enroll into the Naturalization Services Program while on public assistance can continue to receive services even if their public assistance benefits end.

The Naturalization Services Program prioritizes outreach to the following clients:

- Refugees who arrived in the U.S. on or after August 22, 1996, who are currently receiving federal Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefit, have been in the U.S. for at least four (4) years and have not naturalized;
- Refugees receiving state-funded Aged, Blind or Disabled (ABD) benefits; or
- Lawful permanent residents (LPR) who are currently receiving ABD.

Providers prioritize service to reach this targeted group of “outreach” participants.

The Naturalization Services Program provides specialized and culturally appropriate services that help clients become U.S. citizens. These services include intake eligibility screening, application assistance, preparing fee waiver requests, assistance in obtaining medical disability exemption for disabled and elderly clients medically unable to pass the exam, citizenship training and preparation classes, interview preparation and on-site interview assistance, appeals, and follow-up reporting to confirm enrolled clients have naturalized.

### **Program Budget and Expenditures**

For SFY 2017, the Washington State Legislature appropriated \$1,657,000 in general state funds (GF-S) for the Naturalization Services Program. ORIA administers the total budget for this program via statewide contracts for the provision of services. See **Attachment C**.

In SFY 2017, the Naturalization Services Program has expended \$1,646,184.

#### ***Success Story:***

At age 61, Trevor lives with illnesses that make it difficult to move, speak, and retain information. Prior to visiting Tacoma Community House, two other organizations told him that he should not apply for citizenship because it would be too difficult for him to pass the civics exam. After working hard, he finally earned his U.S. citizenship on July 31, 2017.

### **Program Outcomes**

In SFY 2017, the Naturalization Services Program served 3,008 unduplicated clients. Out of those served, 646 (21%) identified as outreach participants; and providers reported that 1,081 clients became naturalized U.S. citizens with 107 (10%) of those clients identifying as outreach participants.

# NATURALIZATION SERVICES

## BACKGROUND

Washington State has a large and dynamic immigrant community and is among the top five refugee receiving states in the nation<sup>3</sup>. According to the American Community Survey in 2005, out of Washington's total population of 6,985,464, approximately 13.4 percent (937,571) are foreign-born, and 46.7 percent of those are Naturalized U.S. citizens<sup>4</sup>.

Each year, the Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) welcomes approximately 700,000 citizens during naturalization ceremonies across the U.S. and around the world. In FFY 2016, 752,772 people became U.S. citizens, including 20,204 people in Washington State<sup>5</sup>. Naturalization is the hallmark of successful integration. Immigrants who naturalize receive the same rights as other citizens, including the right to vote and the ability to participate in civic engagement. Other benefits include full protection of the U.S. Constitution, freedom to travel abroad, and eligibility for federal benefits such as Social Security benefits and Medicare. See **Attachment A** for basic information on becoming a U.S. citizen.

Since its creation in April 1997, ORIA's Naturalization Services Program continues to provide specialized and culturally appropriate services to assist eligible immigrants receiving public assistance that are interested in becoming U.S. citizens to apply, prepare and successfully naturalize in Washington State.

In SFY 2017, ORIA provided Naturalization Services through 17 contracts statewide with 12 contractors, community-based organizations (CBOs), nonprofit legal services organizations that specialize in immigration and refugee resettlement agencies recognized by the Office of Legal Access Programs (OLAP) in the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) (See **Attachment C**). Previously, the Board of Immigration Appeals administered this recognition. Some Contractors hold multiple contracts to provide services at different locations statewide.

ORIA also leverages existing community resources whenever possible to maximize access to naturalization service. For example, ORIA contracts with the City of Seattle's Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs (OIRA) to provide naturalization services in King County. Through this partnership, Washington State supports a broader collaborative approach to offering services in King County. The City of Seattle's New Citizens Program offers access to training and technical assistances to support any state-funded provider as well as training for citizenship class teachers.

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<sup>3</sup> Refugee Processing Center: <http://www.wrapsnet.org/Reports/Archives/tabid/215/Default.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, American Fact Finder:

<https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmk>

<sup>5</sup> USCIS, Naturalization Data Set: <https://www.uscis.gov/tools/reports-studies/immigration-forms-data/data-set-form-n-400-application-naturalization>

All Contractors are DOJ recognized organizations with DOJ accredited individuals on staff and/or have access to a licensed immigration attorney. Contractors also have ties to ethnic communities and provide bilingual services in culturally appropriate ways to immigrants seeking naturalization services. Many organizations hire and train immigrants and former refugees from the same or similar ethnic or geographic background to serve refugee and immigrant clients. Citizenship classes are held in convenient locations such as at the CBO, community colleges, neighborhood community centers, church facilities, and public housing multi-purpose rooms. Providers tailor classes to meet the needs of their participants, creating flexibility in the class times and locations, teaching techniques, and available transportation assistance.

## **ELIGIBLE POPULATION**

Most legal immigrants, including refugees, must reside in the U.S. for five years before they are eligible to become citizens. There are some exceptions, for example: immigrants who obtained permanent residency through marriage to a U.S. citizen can apply after residing in the U.S. for three (3) years, and applicants who served in the U.S. armed forces during war may obtain citizenship without first becoming a permanent resident if they were in the U.S. upon enlistment into the U.S. military.

Individuals are eligible to receive DSHS-funded Naturalization Services if they are non-citizen, legal immigrants who:

- Are recipients of Supplemental Security Income (SSI), or other state/federal funded cash, food, medical assistance, or were receiving such benefits at the time the participant began receiving Naturalization Services;
- Meet the eligibility criteria to apply for U.S. citizenship, including lawful permanent residence status; and
- Are eligible to naturalize or will be eligible to naturalize within one (1) year of receiving Naturalization Services.

DSHS Naturalization Services Program identifies refugees who receive federal SSI or state-funded Aged, Blind or Disabled (ABD) benefits as a target group and designates them as “Outreach” participants. Outreach participants are:

- Refugees who arrived in the U.S. on or after August 22, 1996, who are currently receiving SSI, have been in the U.S. for at least four (4) years and have not naturalized;
- Refugees receiving ABD; or
- Lawful permanent residents (LPR) who are currently receiving ABD.

Refugees are only eligible for SSI for up to seven (7) years unless they naturalize. If they fail to become a U.S. citizen, they will lose their SSI cash benefits (a monthly income of \$735 per eligible individual and \$1,103 per eligible couple). Once they lose SSI, they are eligible for the Washington State ABD program, which is a monthly cash benefit of up to \$197. Naturalizing these individuals allows SSI recipients to keep or regain their benefits, which is a higher monthly income.

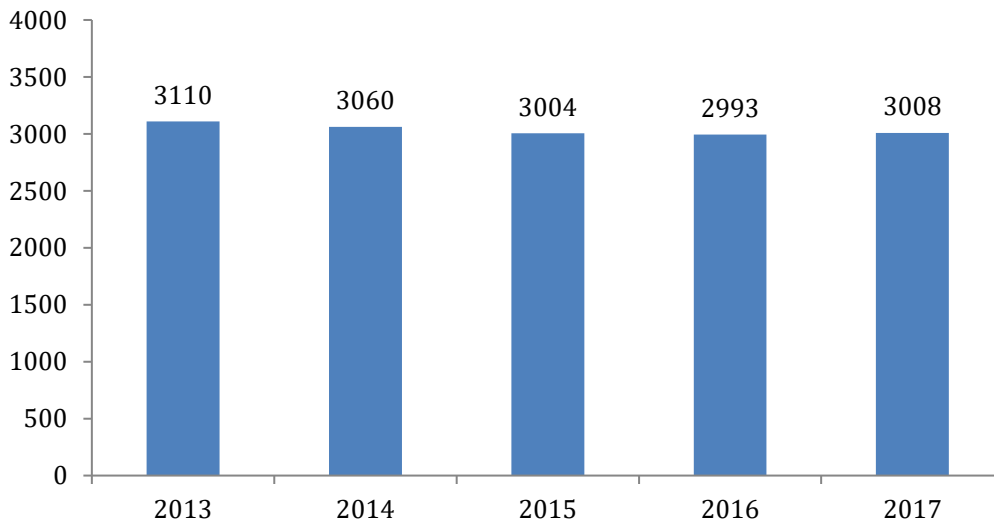
Clients who enroll into the Naturalization Services Program while on public assistance can continue to receive services even if their public assistance benefits end.

## POPULATION SERVED

In SFY 2017, a total number of 3,008 participants received naturalization services, of which approximately 1,426 (47%) were refugees and 1,582 (53%) were non-refugees clients<sup>6</sup>.

The chart below shows the number of Naturalization Services Program participants from SFY 2013-2017:

**Total Number of Participants in DSHS Naturalization Services Program  
SFY 2013-2017**



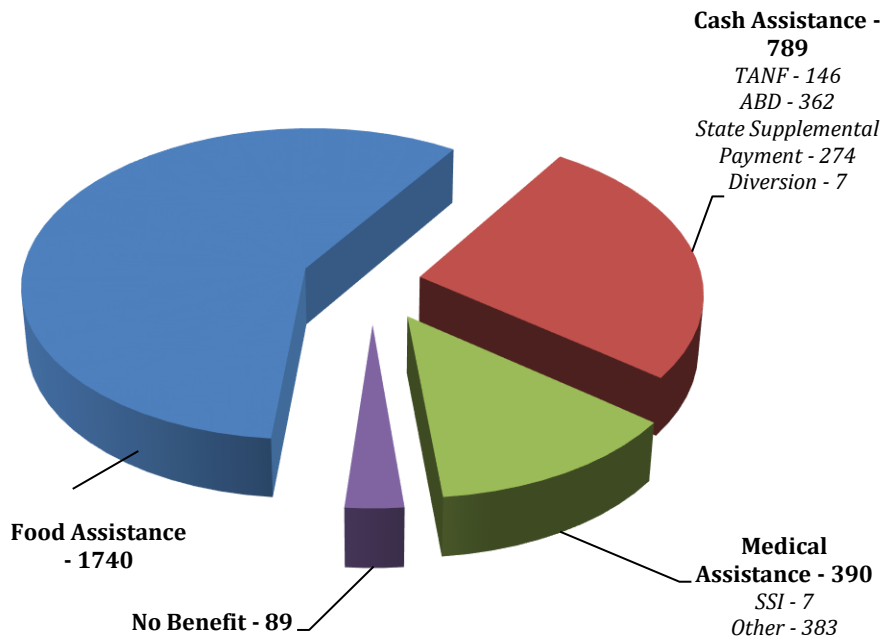
The following chart shows the total number of unduplicated participants in SFY 2017 by their benefit type. If a client is in more than one public assistance program, DSHS uses

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<sup>6</sup> Data Source: RIA, ACES Database Warehouse as of 11/9/2016.

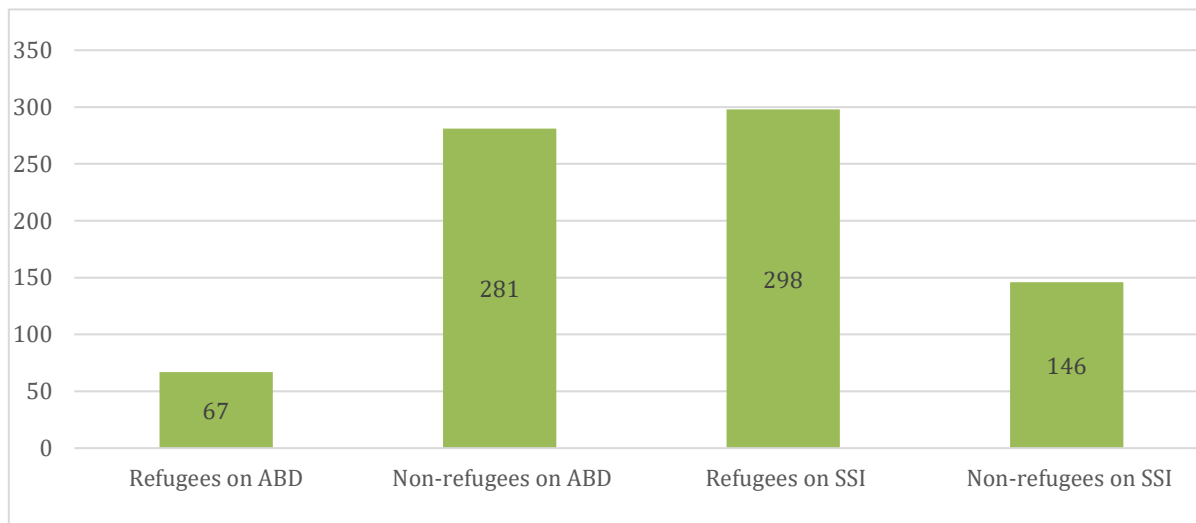
the unduplicated client count based on program hierarchy: cash, food, and then medical.

### Number of Unduplicated Participants by Benefit Type in SFY2016<sup>7</sup>



The following chart shows the total 792 clients on ABD and SSI served in SFY 2017:

### Number of Refugees/Non-Refugees on ABD/SSI in SFY2017<sup>8</sup>



<sup>7</sup> Data Source: RIA, ACES Database Warehouse as of 10/05/2017. 89 Clients have no benefit. Clients who enroll into the Naturalization Services Program while on public assistance can continue to receive services even if their public assistance benefits end.

<sup>8</sup> Data Source: RIA, ACES Database Warehouse as of 10/05/2017.



In SFY 2017, 646 participants met the criteria that prioritize them for outreach and recruitment into the program. For instance, these are refugee at risk of losing their federal SSI benefits if they fail to naturalize within seven years after arrival in the United States. They are also refugees who are receiving state-funded Aged, Blind or Disable cash assistance, when they could be eligible for SSI if they became U.S. citizens.

In addition, there were 146 legal permanent residents (LPRs) receiving SSI but were not considered as outreach participants, because they will not lose their SSI if they fail to naturalize. LPRs are eligible for SSI if they have 40 federal credits of work in the U.S. and the 7-year rule does not apply to them. If LPRs entered the U.S. on or after August 22, 1996, then LPRs may not be eligible for SSI for the first five years as a lawfully admitted permanent resident, even if they have 40 credits of earnings.

# SERVICES

In SFY 2017, the DSHS contracted providers offered the following services through the Naturalization Services Program:

- Intake Screening - Intake screening is conducted to determine eligibility and to make referrals as necessary to an attorney or a DOJ accredited person to address legal and good moral character<sup>9</sup> issues associated with an application for naturalization. (An intake screening completed for an outreach participant is a separate Outreach Enrollment payment point for invoicing purposes.)
- N-400 Assistance - Assistance with completion and submittal of the USCIS Application for Naturalization Form (Form N-400). The form is lengthy and difficult for many participants to complete.
- Fee Waiver - Assistance in obtaining a fee waiver (Form I-912) to USCIS. N-400 Application fees and required fingerprint fees may be provided if a Fee Waiver request is not approved by USCIS.
- Training Hours - Citizenship preparation training and instruction includes classes in American History and civics and USCIS interview preparation. English language training needed for the citizenship test may also be provide.
- Disability Waiver - Assistance with completion and submittal of the USCIS Medical Certification for Disability Exception (Form N-648), as well as, assistance in obtaining other test exemptions when appropriate.
- Interview Preparation - Includes follow-up with participants and USCIS on the date/time for an interview; arrangement for interpreters, attorneys, and additional documents requested by USCIS; and provide additional sessions to practice pronunciation and diction.
- Interview Assistance - Assisting participants to apply for special accommodations during the interview process and/or being present on-site with participants during his/her interview to provide assistance and support.
- Fingerprint Fee - Reimbursement of the fingerprint fee for all participants age 75 years and under who do not meet USCIS criteria for fee waivers and have received a denial of eligibility of their waiver request from USCIS based on ineligibility.

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<sup>9</sup> Some items USCIS will consider for good moral character include criminal record, lying to gain immigration benefits, and failing to pay court-ordered child support.

- N-400 Fee - Reimbursement of the USCIS Form N-400 application-processing fee when participant is ineligible for a fee waiver. This requires written approval of an exception to policy from the DSHS ORIA.
- Appeals - For Immigration Attorney/BIA accredited representative to assist with a Request for a Hearing on a Decision in Naturalization Proceedings (USCIS Form N-336) to request a hearing before an immigration officer on the denial of the participant's USCIS N-400 Application.

## **A. Test Exemptions and Accommodations**

Contractor staff assists applicants to apply for test exemptions and accommodations to ensure that they have the best support to pass the naturalization test successfully. The process to obtain exemptions and accommodations is often complex and lengthy thus, assistance from trained provider staff is vital to the successful completion of the naturalization process.

Common exemptions include:

- English and Civics Examination  
There are two general exemptions: 50/20 (50 years of age and residing in the U.S. for at least 20 years) and 55/15 (55 years of age and residing in the U.S. for at least 15 years). Meeting either criterion means the applicant can waive the requirement to read and write a sentence correctly in English during the naturalization examination. The applicant still needs to take the American civics exam in English unless granted a waiver to take the same exam in the applicant's native language. The applicant is responsible to bring an interpreter to the interview if the civics exam is given in a language other than English.
- Medical Disability  
A medical disability exemption waives the English and civics examination for qualified applicants. A licensed medical or osteopathic doctor or licensed clinical psychologist completes Form N-648 to verify the applicant's disability due to a physical or developmental disability or mental impairment that has lasted or will last 12 months or longer. Contractors have reported an increase in denials from the USCIS and have been meeting to strategize on appropriate strategies to address this concern.

Common accommodations include:

- Disability  
USCIS has an obligation under federal law and policy to provide accommodations for physical and mental impairments that make it difficult for applicants to complete the naturalization process, including the examination.

- Age 65 and Older

In some cases, applicants who are 65 years of age and older and have resided in the U.S. for 20 years or more (does not require continuous presence) may be given a shortened version of the naturalization civics examination in the applicant's native language. This waiver does not require the applicant to be disabled.

## **B. Outreach Participants**

Providers prioritize services and pay special attention to address special needs in the outreach target population. For example, elderly refugees may suffer from age related memory loss, lack of concentration and may have difficulty learning a new language. They often require more class time to practice and study before they can successfully pass the naturalization test. Contractors can also assist individuals who are currently receiving ABD or SSI to waive English Language proficiency requirements based on age and length of legal permanent resident status requirements for naturalization. Finally, some contractors are able to provide tutoring for homebound outreach participants.

To recognize the additional assistance and support that outreach participant's need as well as to emphasize outreach participants as the Naturalization Services Program's targeted priority, contractors receive payment points for Outreach Enrollment and Outreach Naturalization Completion.

## **C. Naturalization Completion Reporting**

Contractor staff assists clients throughout the naturalization process, from application completion and submission to being present on-site at USCIS offices during a client's formal interview process that may result in approval of the application. All Contractors are DOJ recognized organizations with DOJ accredited individuals on staff and/or have access to a licensed attorney who is able to appear before the Board of Immigration Appeals as the client's legal representative to appeal a denial of a Naturalization application. DOJ recognized organizations and staff receive notification when their client has succeeded in obtaining approval of U.S. citizenship, and receive an invitation to take the oath during a scheduled USCIS citizenship ceremony throughout the state. Contractors are also proactive in following up with clients served who have naturalized but may not have informed the service provider. Contractors report to DSHS as they learn of naturalization completions.

# **PROGRAM FUNDING**

The DSHS Naturalization Services Program receives all of its support solely through general state funds (GF-S). In SFY 2017, the Washington State Legislature appropriated \$1.657 million for services. The funding has remained stable since 2012. Many providers report that the need for naturalization services in the community

extends beyond the funding provided. To avoid gaps in services, providers leverage state dollars with other funding resources, such as grants from USCIS. Regardless of the varied funding streams, providers report waiting lists for their services.

In SFY 2017, the Naturalization program expended \$1,646,184. The following chart shows total program disbursement for SFY 2013-2017:

State Fiscal Year	Total Budget	Total Distribution	Balance
2013	\$1,657,000	\$1,656,273	\$ 727
2014	\$1,657,000	\$1,617,793 <sup>10</sup>	\$ 39,207
2015	\$1,657,000	\$1,634,792 <sup>11</sup>	\$ 22,208
2016	\$1,657,000	\$1,649,362	\$ 7,638
2017	\$1,657,000	\$1,646,184	\$ 10,816

## PROGRAM DISBURSEMENTS

The Naturalization Services Program contracts follow a state fiscal year schedule (July 1 to June 30). In SFY 2017, Contractors entered into a performance-based contract structured on naturalization completions. This contracting model meets the performance based outcome criteria for contracting required by the Governor's Executive Order 10-02, Performance Based Contracting. Under this model, Contractors may receive up to 95% of their contract amount by billing for specific service payment points and may earn the remaining 5% by achieving their individually negotiated naturalization completion annual performance outcome goals.

Contractors have a menu of services that they are allowed to bill for and make discretionary determination on how they want to spend down their allotted contract amount under the 95%/5% model. Contractors submit invoices for naturalization services on a monthly basis and submit billings up to 30 days after each month of service. ORIA permits the submission of an additional final invoice after their June submission is allowed to close out the program service year. DSHS has 30 days from the date of receipt and approval of each invoice to process and make payment.

<sup>10</sup> As of October 1, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> As of September 29, 2015, a balance of \$22,208 was unspent.

This chart shows SFY 2017 program expenditures by service type:

### Program Expenditures, SFY 2017

Service	Expenditures	Expenditure Percentages
Intake Screening	\$182,677	11.0%
Outreach Enrollment	\$23,100	1.4%
Assistance with USCIS N-400 Application	\$509,987	30.8%
Fee Waiver Request	\$164,395	9.9%
USCIS Fingerprint Fee	\$0	0.0%
USCIS N-400 Application Fee	\$0	0.0%
Disability Exception Assistance - USCIS N648 Form	\$58,001	3.5%
Citizenship Training Hours	\$167,702	10.1%
Naturalization Completion Follow-up	\$378,700	22.9%
Outreach Naturalization Completion	\$16,050	1.0%
Appeals	\$250	0.0%
Interview Preparation	\$42,600	2.6%
Interview Assistance	\$19,700	1.2%
Annual Performance Outcome Goal Achievement	\$83,022	5.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$1,646,184</b>	<b>99.3%</b>

## PROGRAM OUTCOMES

In SFY 2017, the Naturalization program had:

- 3,008 unduplicated clients received Naturalization services, of which 646 (21%) were Outreach participants.
- 1,081 Naturalization completions were reported for the total unduplicated caseload, out of those 107 (10%) were Outreach participants.

Although the main performance outcome goal for this program is completed naturalizations, given the challenges and complexities of this process for many of the clients, the program also tracks specific activities associated with the naturalization process as outcomes and payment points for billings.

The following reflects reported payment points outcome data for SFY 2017, with a four-year look-back:

### SFY 2013-2017 Outcomes

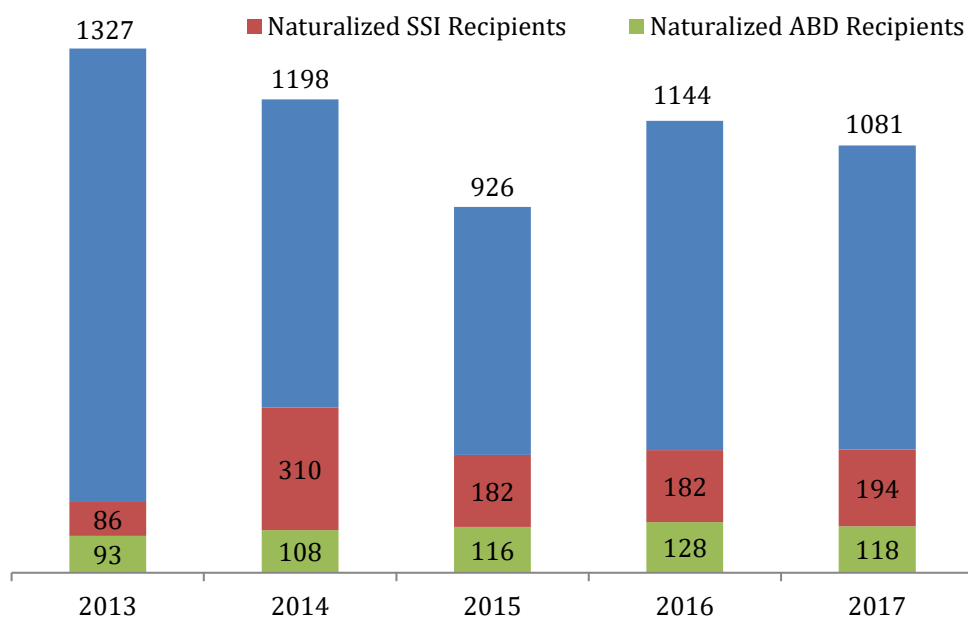
Service	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017 <sup>12</sup>
Intake Screening	1,783	1,815	1,866	1,736	1,827
Outreach Enrollment	163	127	189	167	154
Assistance with USCIS N-400 Application	1,540	1,638	1,580	1,599	1,700
Fee Waiver Request	1,548	1,628	1,567	1,558	1,645
USCIS Fingerprint Fee	0	2	0	0	0
USCIS N-400 Application Fee	0	2	0	0	0
Disability Exception Assistance - USCIS N648 Form	251	193	253	235	233
Citizenship Training Hours	27,737 Hours	24,624 Hours	25,490 Hours	18,069 Hours	16,771 Hours
Naturalization Completion Follow-up	1,327	1,198	926	1,144	1,082
Outreach Naturalization Completion	179	95	85	114	107
Appeals	0	4	5	2	1
Interview Preparation	692	568	532	505	426
Interview Assistance	9	138	129	270	197

<sup>12</sup> Data Source: RIA, ACES Database Warehouse as of 10/05/2017.

In SFY 2017, more contract funding was used for N-400 Assistance due to the payment point changes, which limited the number of other naturalization services that the Contractors could provide, including Naturalization Completion Follow-up.

The following chart shows the number of clients who have been granted U.S. citizenship status through the naturalization process from SFY 2013-2017, with breakout counts for SSI and ABD recipients who have naturalized:

**Total Number of Naturalized Participants, SFY 2013-2017<sup>13</sup>**



The actual number of naturalized individuals is likely much higher than captured here, because participants may neglect to report their naturalization to service contractors. Failure to report a change in status may be due to a number of factors such as multiple attempts before a successful naturalization, relocation during the process, and naturalizing on their own after receiving services through a contractor.

Overall, Washington State follows the current national trend of increased naturalized citizens. For example, 752,772 individuals naturalized in FFY16 as compared to FFY15 when 730,685 individuals naturalized<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Data Source: RIA, ACES Database Warehouse as of 10/5/2017.

<sup>14</sup> USCIS, Naturalization Data Set: <https://www.uscis.gov/tools/reports-studies/immigration-forms-data/data-set-form-n-400-application-naturalization>



## **BARRIERS TO NATURALIZATION**

The application process for naturalizing is very complicated, and even a simple mistake can delay processing. It is also very costly; the current naturalization fee is \$725 per person (includes application fee and mandatory fingerprint fee). Low-income immigrants find the cost for professional assistance combined with the naturalization fees prohibitive, and without DSHS's free Naturalization Services Program, many may not attempt to apply to naturalize.

The high cost of application fees can be a barrier to individuals applying for citizenship. However, USCIS will waive this fee for low-income applicants such as those on public assistance. Contractors are required to assist participants to submit a fee waiver request and help them gather the documentation they need to support their request. In SFY 2017, Contractors reported helping participants submit 1,645 fee waiver requests to USCIS. While there is great benefit in seeking waivers, filing waiver requests is a significant workload for both the service provider and the applicant. Submitting a fee waiver request will generally increase the processing time by about two months.

The changes made in 2013 to the naturalization examination format continue to make the naturalization process more difficult for refugees and immigrants who are applying to become U.S. citizens. The current examination format has moved away from civics trivia to emphasize instead, the basic concepts of U.S. government structure and American history and geography. To pass the test, applicants must have a more detailed understanding of U.S. history and civics. For example, the examination tests where the applicant understands how the federalist papers included the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. USCIS hoped that the new test would encourage attachment to the principles of citizenship<sup>15</sup>.

DSHS and service contractors are working to mitigate barriers to the naturalization process by helping participants overcome anxieties and barriers including:

- Age-related memory problems and their impact on learning civics and history
- Inability to speak English under the pressure of the citizenship interview
- Citizenship classes tailored for “everyone” regardless of English capabilities
- Difficulty in obtaining test exemptions and/ or accommodations
- High costs related to the naturalization process: \$640 application fee and \$85 for the mandatory fingerprint fee

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<sup>15</sup> Alphonso Aguilar, Chief of the Office of Citizenship, Press Conference on New Naturalization Test, September 27, 2007, [http://www.uscis.gov/files/pressrelease/natzrndtbl\\_72sep07.pdf](http://www.uscis.gov/files/pressrelease/natzrndtbl_72sep07.pdf)

Another barrier in the naturalization process relates to Medical Disability Waivers. Over the last couple of years, DSHS contractors have been experiencing an increased level of disability waiver denials by USCIS. A disability waiver allows disabled clients, particularly those with mental health issues, to either take a simplified citizenship test or have the test waived. The “spike” in denials is not unique to our state and both the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement and the USCIS recognizes this issue and have previously organized discussions on this topic. The concern is that USCIS requires medical documentation to support the disability request and USCIS agents, who are not medically trained, are overriding the medical evidence based on their own perception of the client’s disability.

ORIA collaborates with the City of Seattle’s Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs (OIRA) to coordinate and address with the USCIS the struggles that many Contractors face in obtaining an approval of the N-648 Disability Exception Requests for refugee and immigrant clients. The rejection of the N-648s greatly affects the increased time contractors need to spend to resubmit applications, and denials of N-648s may have resulted in some refugee clients losing SSI benefits for failure to naturalize within the seven-year federal timeline. To improve their performance, USCIS is training immigration officers to handle disability waiver requests, and offering more trainings to stakeholders to improve the ways that the medical experts are completing on the disability waiver requirements.

The Department recognizes service providers who contract with DSHS to provide naturalization services as playing a key role in identifying barriers, participating in the development of strategies and coordinating the service network viable solutions to help address barriers to naturalization for DSHS clients who want to naturalize. Individual meetings are held with providers throughout the SFY 2017 program year for ORIA staff and contractors to discuss outreach to clients, program successes and challenges and contracting structure and billing processes that may need to be changed to provide providers additional support needed to provide quality and effective naturalization services.

## **SUCCESS STORIES**

- Tacoma Community House – “At age 61, Trevor lives with illnesses that make it difficult to move, speak, and retain information. Prior to visiting Tacoma Community House, two other organizations told him that he should not apply for citizenship because it would be too difficult for him to pass the civics exam.

As a legal permanent resident for 50 years, he lived with a constant fear that he might not be welcomed back in the U.S. if he were to go visit his native country.

After working hard, he finally earned his U.S. citizenship on July 31, 2017 and he is now waiting for the next presidential election when he can exercise his right to vote.

Trevor received a congratulatory letter from a state representative for his success story.

- International Rescue Committee – A Haitian individual, who had been a permanent resident since 1994, with significant difficulties speaking English, participated in the naturalization program. Because she was over 50 years of age at the time of enrollment, she was exempt from the English requirement, but still required to pass the civics test. She studied diligently and came to IRC's office numerous times for individual tutoring sessions. On her first attempt to pass the test, she was successful and naturalized in July 2016.

This, in turn, allowed her to upgrade the visa petitions she had previously filed for her children several years ago, making two of them eligible for immediate relative consideration and visa processing.

She expects to be able to reunite with her children in the very near future.

- Refugee & Immigrant Services NW – An Iraqi family of three applied for citizenship in 2014 but did not receive any notifications from USCIS regarding their pending case. After many years, the family kept anxiously waiting for an interview. RISNW contacted USCIS repetitively to check on the status of their applications. USCIS continuously informed them that the application was under processing. One of the family members lost her SSI benefits because she did not become a U.S. citizen after seven years of arrival. Due to the lack of resources, they could not pay their bills and rent, and received an eviction notice. RISNW reached out to the congressional district office for assistance. Within 90 days, one of the family members received a naturalization interview notice and she finally became a U.S. citizen in June 2017.

She is now receiving SSI benefits again and the other family members have interviews scheduled in October 2017. The last family member, who has physical and mental disabilities, is waiting to receive his interview notice soon too.

# **ATTACHMENT A**

## **BASIC INFORMATION ON BECOMING A UNITED STATES CITIZEN**

### **Who is eligible?**

Legal permanent residents (LPR) who have resided in the U.S. for five years (three years if married to a U.S. citizen). LPR status is indicated on the applicant's USCIS I-551 Permanent Resident Card (also known as a "green card"). Refugees are eligible to apply for LPR status one year after arriving in the U.S.

### **Requirements to apply for citizenship - Applicant must:**

- Be at least 18 years old;
- Have been present in the U.S. as a Permanent Resident for at least half of the 5 years (three years if married to a U.S. citizen);
- Be able to pass a test on speaking, understanding, reading and writing basic English;
- Be able to pass a U.S. history and government test;
- Have good moral character;
- Understand and accept the oath of allegiance to the U.S.; and
- Not have a citizenship-related legal problem.

### **Exceptions in the testing requirements**

For applicants that meet certain age and time in the U.S. criteria, the USCIS makes exceptions to the testing procedures. This may include allowing the applicant to bring an interpreter for the English test, or asking the applicant 10 history and U.S. government questions instead of 20. For applicants who meet the USCIS criteria for disability, both tests are waived.

### **What is the process?**

If the applicant meets all the eligibility requirements, he or she may file a USCIS Application for Naturalization form with required photos and a money order or check for the application fee (\$640) and fingerprint fee (\$85) to the USCIS. The process takes approximately 4 months from the date of the application to date of interview with USCIS.

### **Are there any resources available to help?**

There are community based organizations in the state that provide services to eligible applicants including assistance in completing the citizenship application and disability waiver requests, providing applicants with the USCIS fees, or assisting them to request the USCIS to waive the fees for low income families. These agencies also provide citizenship preparation classes.

## **What are the benefits?**

Many SSI clients that have not naturalized or cannot show they have 40 work quarters will lose their SSI benefits when they reach their 7-year time limit. By becoming citizens, they can maintain their benefits and become eligible for a full range of other public benefits. Citizens can apply for more family members to immigrate to the U.S. and often more quickly than lawful permanent residents. Children, who are under 18 and live at home at the time one or both of their parents naturalizes, automatically become U.S. citizens. Citizens can vote, can travel abroad without worrying about re-entry permits, are protected from deportation and can apply for certain government jobs.

## **ATTACHMENT B**

### **RCW 74.08A.130**

#### **Immigrants - Naturalization facilitation.**

The department shall make an affirmative effort to identify and proactively contact legal immigrants receiving public assistance to facilitate their applications for naturalization. The department shall obtain a complete list of legal immigrants in Washington who are receiving correspondence regarding their eligibility from the social security administration. The department shall inform immigrants regarding how citizenship may be attained. In order to facilitate the citizenship process, the department shall coordinate and contract, to the extent necessary, with existing public and private resources and shall, within available funds, ensure that those immigrants who qualify to apply for naturalization are referred to or otherwise offered classes. The department shall assist eligible immigrants in obtaining appropriate test exemptions, and other exemptions in the naturalization process, to the extent permitted under federal law.

# ATTACHMENT C

## SFY 2017 NATURALIZATION CONTRACTS

<b>Contractor</b>	<b>Contract Amount</b>
<b>REGION 1</b>	
NW Immigrant Rights Project (Yakima County)	\$ 11,900
World Relief – Spokane	\$ 145,277
World Relief – Tri Cities	<u>\$ 72,407</u>
Region 1 Total	\$ 229,584
<b>REGION 2</b>	
City of Seattle	\$ 365,815
International Rescue Committee	\$ 65,326
Korean Women’s Association (King County)	\$ 51,896
Lutheran Community Services NW (King County)	\$ 50,049
NW Immigrant Rights Project (King County)	\$ 31,270
Refugee & Immigrant Services NW	\$ 153,512
Refugee Federation Service Center	\$ 118,600
Somali Youth & Family Club	\$ 29,441
Ukrainian Community Center of WA	\$ 60,327
World Relief – Seattle	<u>\$ 119,134</u>
Region 2 Total	\$1,045,370
<b>REGION 3</b>	
Korean Women’s Association (Pierce County)	\$ 94,156
Lutheran Community Services NW (Clark County)	\$ 140,039
Multicultural Self-Sufficiency Movement	\$ 83,913
Tacoma Community House	<u>\$ 63,938</u>
Region 3 Total	\$ 382,046
<b>TOTAL CONTRACT AMOUNT</b>	<b>\$1,657,000</b>