



W A S H I N G T O N

new **A M E R I C A N S**

Gateway to Citizenship

FISCAL YEAR 2020 FINAL REPORT





Gabriela Ayala and her daughter at Citizenship Day in Pasco

Program Overview

The purpose of the Washington New Americans (WNA) program is to promote successful immigrant integration by helping eligible immigrants become U.S. citizens. WNA organizes free citizenship events throughout the year and across the state. These events bring legal services to people who have limited access due to financial or geographic barriers. WNA also re-grants more than half of program funding to non-profit organizations across the state who provide free and low-cost naturalization services and education to their communities.

There are an estimated 263,000 Legal Permanent Residents (LPRs) eligible for citizenship in Washington State.¹ However, eligibility does not mean access. The barriers to successfully applying, particularly for low-income people, continue to grow. The current fee to apply for naturalization is \$725, and it is expected to increase again this year. Over the last three decades, the fee has increased more than 700%, even after accounting for inflation.

Successful integration of immigrant communities is key to the economic and civic health of the state, and access to citizenship and civics instruction are crucial components of immigrant integration. The WNA program provides residents with the information, legal services, and resources and education needed to successfully pursue naturalization, giving them the opportunity to become U.S. citizens and active, engaged members of our community.

¹Partnership for a New American Economy, "The Contributions of New Americans in Washington," 2016. <http://www.newamericaneconomy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/nae-wa-report.pdf>

FY20 at a Glance

This year, with its 16 grantees, the Washington New Americans program had a combined total of:

7,709 clients served¹

1,702 intakes completed

1,087 naturalization applications completed

1,127 clients naturalized²

323 fee waiver applications completed

49 reduced fee applications completed

556 children eligible to derive citizenship upon approval of their parent's naturalization application

13 citizenship events³ (3 Citizenship Days and 10 roving clinics)

891 unduplicated civics students served

96 countries of origin⁴

62 languages spoken⁴

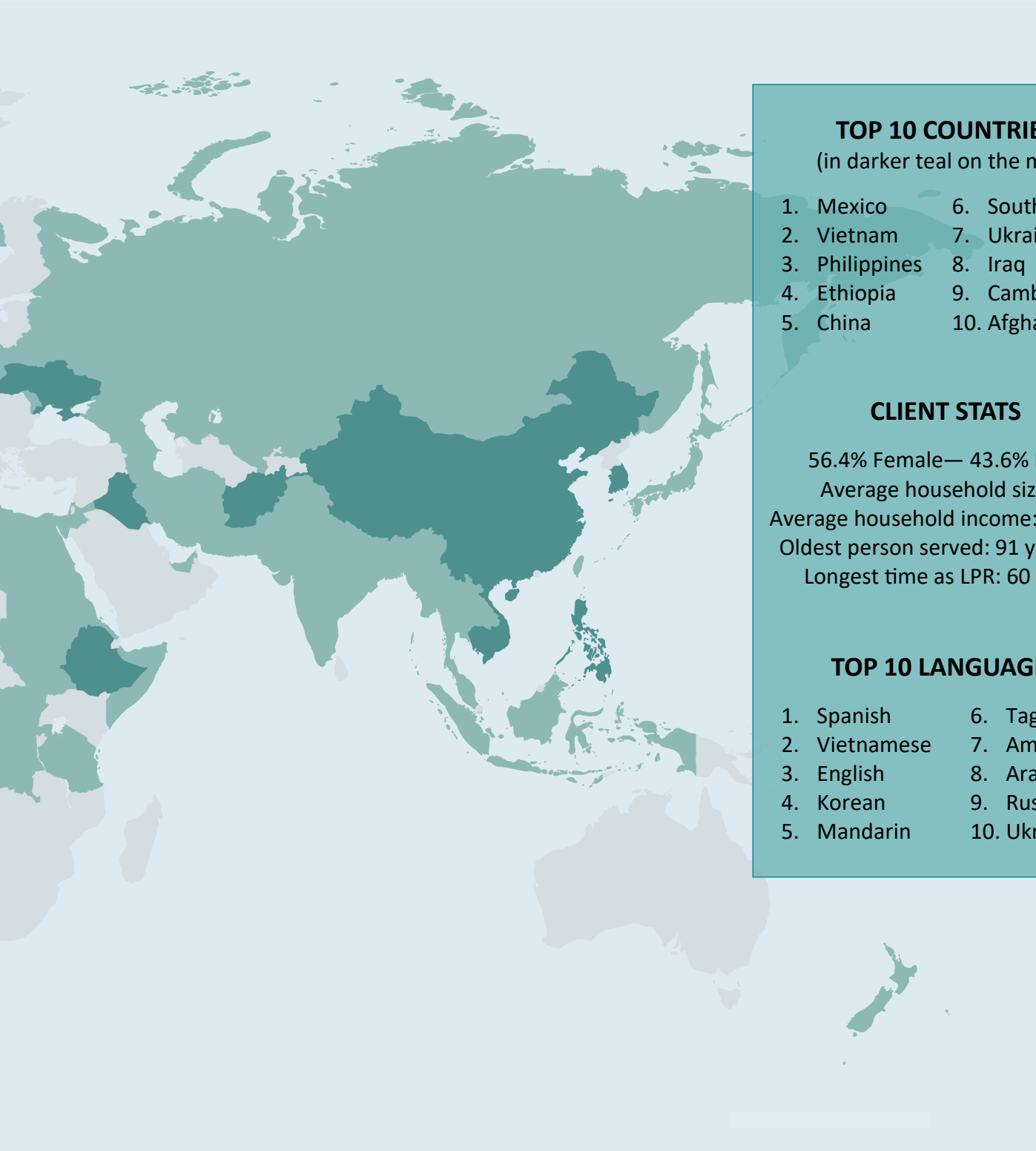
112 outreach events conducted

¹This includes everyone reached through WNA, including people who received citizenship information in-person or over the phone, clients enrolled in civics, and clients who complete intakes and received follow-on services

²This represents all FY19 and FY20 clients who naturalized since the start of FY19. 79% of applications submitted in FY20 are still pending. For more information, see pages 8 and 9.

³Originally, 6 Citizenship Days and 15 roving clinics were scheduled for the year, but 3 Citizenship Days and 5 roving clinics were cancelled due to COVID-19. 12 of the scheduled roving clinics were part of a monthly, weeknight clinic model that requires clients to attend multiple, short sessions.

⁴This reflects data from all participants, not just those served through WNA state funds. All other numbers listed here are exclusively from the state grant.



TOP 10 COUNTRIES

(in darker teal on the map)

- | | |
|----------------|-----------------|
| 1. Mexico | 6. South Korea |
| 2. Vietnam | 7. Ukraine |
| 3. Philippines | 8. Iraq |
| 4. Ethiopia | 9. Cambodia |
| 5. China | 10. Afghanistan |

CLIENT STATS

56.4% Female— 43.6% Male

Average household size: 3

Average household income: \$36,270

Oldest person served: 91 years old

Longest time as LPR: 60 years

TOP 10 LANGUAGES

- | | |
|---------------|---------------|
| 1. Spanish | 6. Tagalog |
| 2. Vietnamese | 7. Amharic |
| 3. English | 8. Arabic |
| 4. Korean | 9. Russian |
| 5. Mandarin | 10. Ukrainian |

Citizenship 101: The Naturalization Process

Step 1: Determining eligibility

To apply for citizenship you must:

- Be at least 18 years old
- Have been a legal permanent resident (LPR) for at least 5 years¹
- Be a person of Good Moral Character (GMC)²
- Be able to speak, read, and write basic English¹

Step 2: Completing the Application

Gather your personal records and immigration history and complete the N-400, the 20-page naturalization application. Send your application and \$725 to US Department of Homeland Security.

Step 3: The Biometrics Appointment

1-3 months after your application is received, you will have a fingerprinting appointment at USCIS

Step 4: The Interview

3-25 months after your biometrics appointment, you will have your interview. At the interview, a USCIS officer will test you on your knowledge of U.S. history and civics, ask you questions about your application, and test your English.¹

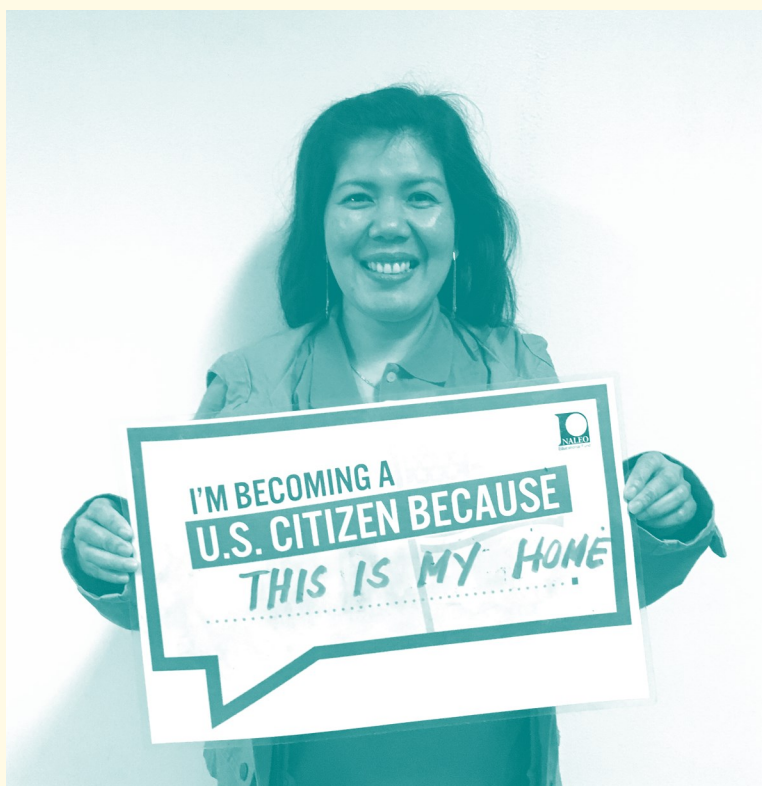
Step 5: Taking the Oath of Allegiance

If you are approved at the interview, your next step is the naturalization ceremony. Once you take the oath, you are officially a U.S. citizen!

¹Certain exemptions exist for the 5-year requirement, the full fee, and the English and civics tests.

²Many people benefit from legal counsel in order to make sure there is nothing in their history that will affect their GMC finding, and in turn affect their ability to naturalize or otherwise threaten their LPR status.

Why do people want to become U.S. Citizens?



“Becoming a citizen will help me get a better job.”

“Being a citizen would change my life because I already feel like a part of this country. I’m the last one [who’s not a citizen] in my family.”

“Just felt right, more like who I am.”

“I want to get more rights and opportunities.”

“I applied because I don’t want to be taken away from my kids. It will have a great impact on my life, because now I can have better rights.”

“I want to vote!”

“To have more freedom of travel to visit my family.”

“For more protection in this country. It would change my life, being more relaxed living here, with less worry.”

Outcomes

The WNA program is responsible for **1,127** new U.S. citizens since July 1, 2018.

Quality of service

The fact that only 4% of all applications submitted were denied attests to the extremely high quality of service provided by the WNA program. This is well below the 2018 and 2019 national level of denials of 10.7% and 9.5%, respectively.¹ For applicants served in FY19, reasons for denials include failure to pass the English or civics tests, having their disability waiver denied, failure to appear at their appointment, and death prior to adjudication.

Delayed results

The backlog of naturalization applications has been growing steadily for several years, and a 2020 report listed Seattle as the worst place in the country to apply for naturalization.² To reduce processing times, in 2019 USCIS decided to start transferring some applications from the Seattle USCIS office to the Yakima or Portland offices for interviews. The transfers did decrease Seattle processing times, but increased processing times for Yakima and Portland-area applicants. Traveling three-plus hours for their interviews was also a substantial burden on the most vulnerable and poor immigrants. Ultimately, USCIS discontinued their transfer practice due to COVID-19, and processing times remain sky-high at all offices. Nowhere is worse than Seattle, where “normal” case processing times at the time of this writing is 16-25 months. With this in mind, the outcomes reported here include data from clients served by WNA and its grantees during Fiscal Years 2019 and 2020. This span more accurately represents the program’s impact on creating new U.S. citizens.

Additionally, the last quarter of FY20 was upended by COVID-19. Nationwide, USCIS offices were closed from March 18 to June 4. This will have a cascading effect on processing times, as postponed interviews have to be accommodated while applications continue to be submitted. It is estimated that over 300,000 people across the country who would have had interviews during that period will not yet be citizens in time to vote in the 2020 election.³ By the end of June 2020, the Yakima office was still not conducting any naturalization interviews. Biometrics appointments resumed in the Seattle office on July 13.

The impacts of COVID-19 will be addressed in more detail later in this report, but it is the main reason for the decrease in applications completed in FY20 as compared to FY19. Further impacts of COVID-19 and the other processing delays account for the fact that 79% of the applications submitted in FY20, and 19% of cases from FY19, are still pending.

Why some people don’t apply

A small proportion of WNA’s clients don’t end up filing their completed applications. Some want to take more time to strengthen their English skills or study for the test, but most cite the \$725 application fee as the key reason. For some, saving the money takes longer than they expect and more urgent life events get in the way. For example, a client unexpectedly falls ill or loses their job. Eventually, as life events pile up, the application that was prepared becomes inaccurate. Or, as was the case in late 2019, a new edition of the application itself is issued, and the previously prepared form is out of date. Other would-be applicants realize their green card will expire soon, and they need to put their money towards the \$540 renewal fee rather than towards their naturalization application.

¹ Boundless, “Over 300,000 Immigrants Still Won’t Become U.S. Citizens In Time For the 2020 Election,” 2020. <https://www.boundless.com/blog/immigrants-vote-2020-election/?fbclid=IwAR3pAYZrZVqztq4U-Tn2b9wVXbLk1Nm7-NLnc5J5tQGoM5paA-yVnOfrHGM>

² Migration Policy Institute, “A Rockier Road to U.S. Citizenship? Findings of a Survey on Changing Naturalization Procedures,” 2020. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/changing-uscis-naturalization-procedures>

³ Boundless, “Green Card Application Denials on the Rise,” 2019. <https://www.boundless.com/blog/uscis-green-card-data-2019/#:~:text=Nationwide%2C%20just%20under%209.5%25%20of,rate%20varied%20considerably%20by%20region.>

	OVERALL	
	Total	%
N-400s Completed	2,496	
Confirmed Citizens	1,127	45%
Did Not Apply	109	4%
Case Still Pending	1,126	45%
Denied	51	4% ¹
Unreachable	85	3%
No Data	19	0.8%

	FY19				FY20			
	Workshops	Grantees	Total	%	Workshops	Grantees	Total	%
N-400s Completed	111	1,299	1,410		63	1,023	1,086	
Confirmed Citizens	63	915	978	69%	0	149	149	14%
Did Not Apply	20	48	68	5%	7	34	41	4%
Case Still Pending	22	246	268	19%	54	804	858	79%
Denied	1	44	45	4% ¹	0	6	6	4% ¹
Unreachable	5	53	58	4%	2	25	27	2%
No Data	0	14	14	1%	0	5	5	0.5%

¹ Pending cases are excluded from the denial rate calculation, since they have not been decided yet. All other percentages in this table are calculated based on the number of N-400s completed.

Soukaroun Souvannvang lives in Renton, WA, and attended Citizenship Day in Renton on September 21, 2019. He has had his green card since 1980. This is his story:



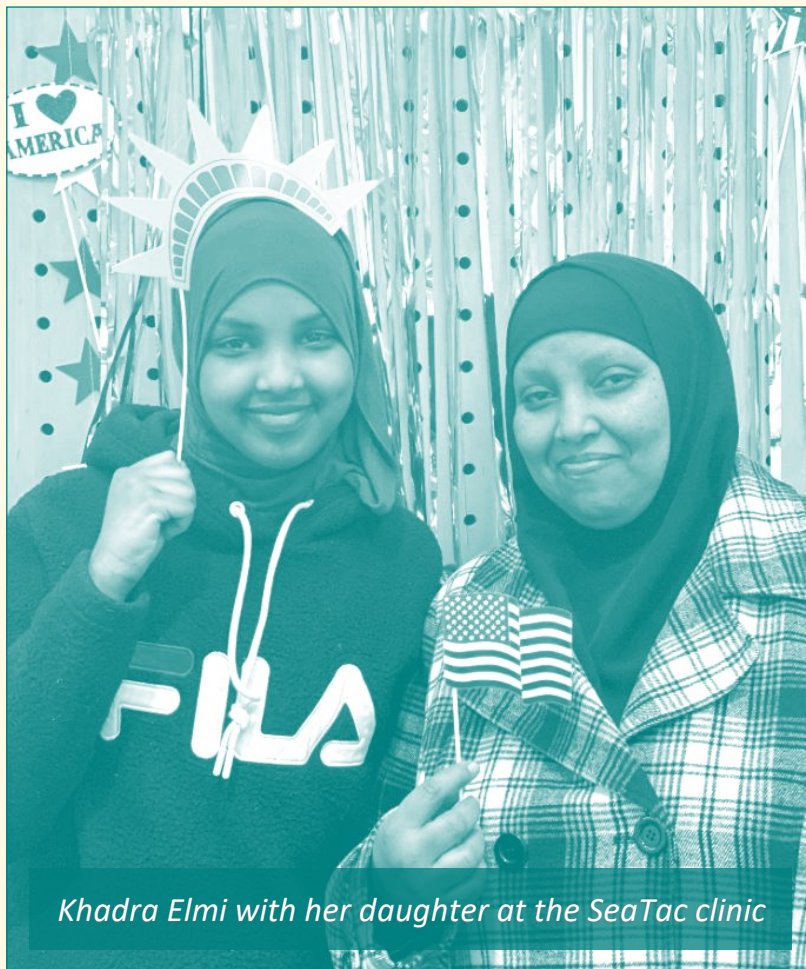
I came here when I was a kid, as a refugee from Thailand, a war-torn country. As a kid growing up without legal status, it is a dream to become a U.S. citizen and belong to this country.

On September 21, I walked by Renton Community College and saw your sign and walked in. Life threw me a curveball—I wouldn't have applied for citizenship if I didn't see the sign. I wanted to naturalize for a long time—my whole family is naturalized. But what made me go for it that day was the timing was right. It was spur of the moment, and the opportunity was there, and it was my time. I didn't have the motivation to go to an office and I had nobody to help me, so I didn't know where to start. It was a great experience with the way you guys handled everything—very informative and helpful.

I'm excited about being able to vote when I naturalize, to make a difference. My vote counts like everyone else. I want to make an impact.

My advice to anyone who is thinking about it is go for it! The opportunity is here. People are here to help you go through the steps. It's a given right to anyone willing or wanting to become a citizen of the United States. The Washington New Americans Program absolutely made a difference in someone's life, and I recommend anyone go to them for help or questions.

Citizenship Events

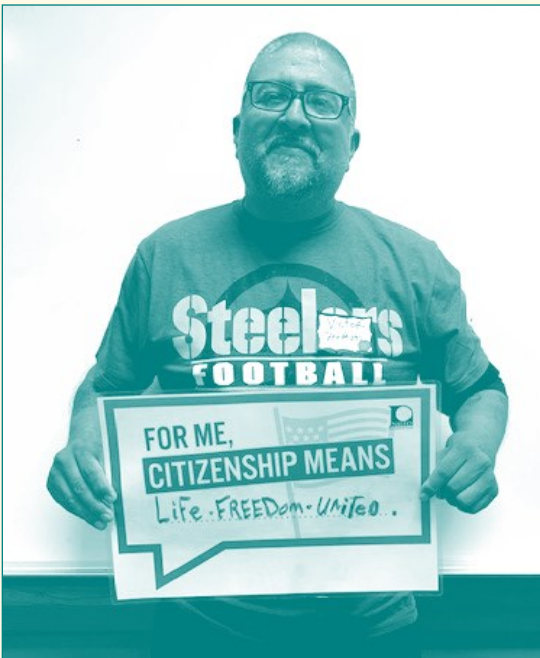


Khadra Elmi with her daughter at the SeaTac clinic

In 2005, the Washington Chapter of the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA-WA) launched Citizenship Day, with the mission to increase access to naturalization services for low-income immigrants and those in geographic areas with few attorneys or service providers. Today's Citizenship Days are large clinics held simultaneously in three locations, twice a year. It is not unusual for some Citizenship Day sites to be attended by more than 100 participants.

As in past years, OneAmerica co-leads Seattle's local citizenship collaborative with 14 other local organizations as part of the New Americans Campaign (NAC) and the City of Seattle New Citizens Campaign (NCC). As part of the collaborative, OneAmerica provides capacity-building expertise to the group. This fiscal year, OneAmerica partnered with Refugee Women's Alliance on a joint citizenship clinic in November 2019. That clinic, as well as a clinic in February 2020 were the product of a continued partnership between WNA and the Port of Seattle, who provided the space for both events.

In February 2019 (FY19), WNA launched a series of monthly clinics in partnership with the Perkins Coie (PC) law firm, and this partnership continued in FY20, with 8 clinics between July and February. PC attorney volunteers are not immigration attorneys, but have been supervised and trained by expert immigration attorneys to do naturalization eligibility screenings. In an era where pro bono immigration legal assistance is in higher demand than ever, a partnership that allows us to train a supplemental volunteer workforce in Washington is critical.



Citizenship Day

September 21, 2019 in *Renton, Ellensburg, and Pasco*

Roving Clinics

November 16, 2019 in *Seattle* in collaboration with *Refugee Women's Alliance (NCC member) and the Port of Seattle*

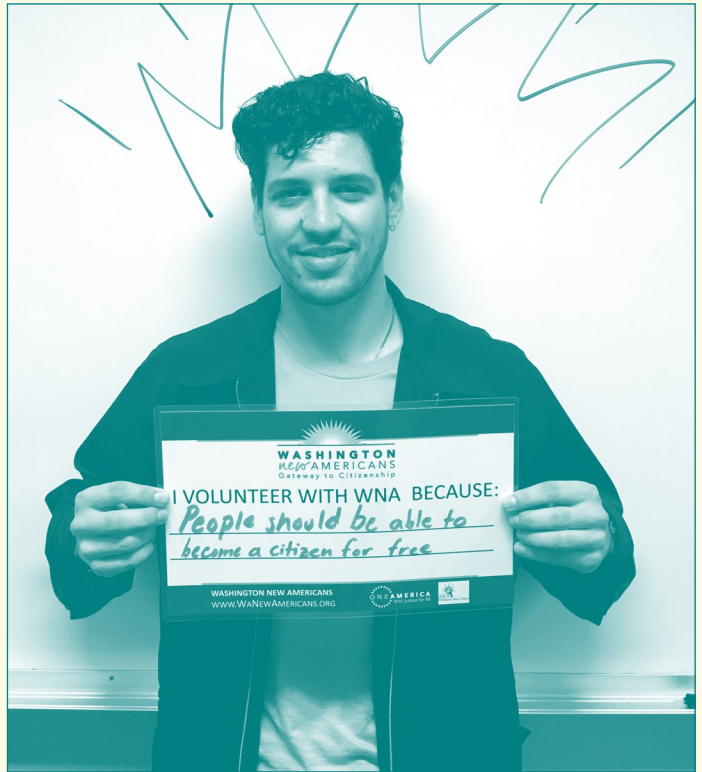
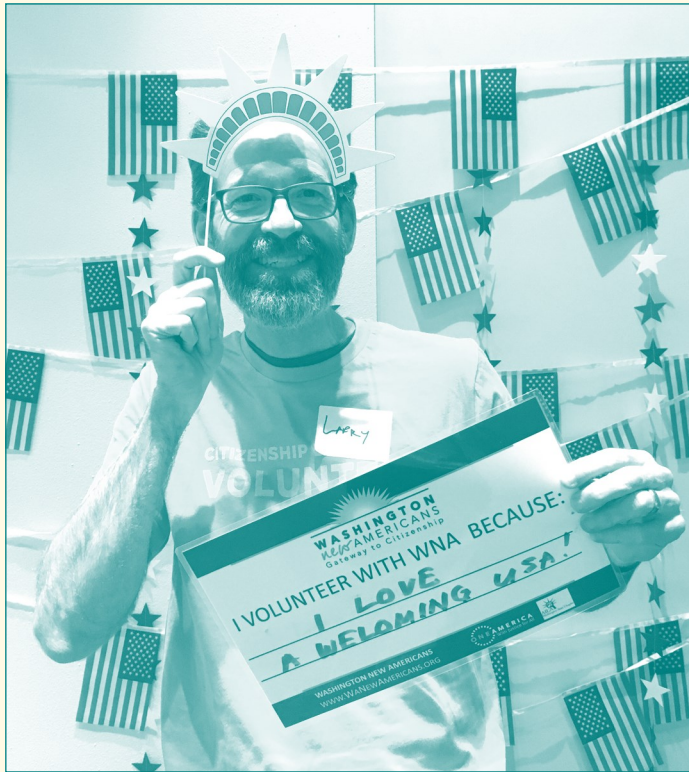
February 22, 2020 in *SeaTac* in collaboration with *the Port of Seattle*

July 24, 2019-February 12, 2020 in *Seattle* in collaboration with *Perkins Coie Law Firm*

This year's citizenship events had a combined total of:

- 178** clients served
- 127** intakes completed
- 64** naturalization applications completed
- 11** fee waiver applications completed
- 7** reduced fee applications completed
- 13** children eligible to derive citizenship upon approval of their parent's naturalization application
- 205** unique volunteers
- 1,340** volunteer hours
 - 347** hours from attorney volunteers
 - \$86,842** in pro bono attorney hours
- 38** countries of origin¹
- 21** languages spoken¹

¹This reflects data from all participants, not just those served through the state grant. All other numbers listed here are exclusively from the state grant.



WNA’s citizenship events bring together volunteers, including immigration attorneys, to help LPRs determine if they are eligible to apply for naturalization. While participants hope to complete their application that day—and many do—those who do not nonetheless receive expert legal advice and valuable information about what they need to do to get ready to apply, or an understanding of why they should never apply. This is becoming more common but also more valuable as USCIS officers increase the level of scrutiny given to every application.

One of the significant benefits of WNA’s events is that they provide free services to all participants. Private immigration attorneys charge at least \$1,000 to assist a naturalization applicant, and often much more if the person’s case is complex. These valuable services are far out of reach for many LPRs. Experienced attorney volunteers recruited through AILA-WA provide comprehensive legal screening and advice even in complex cases involving criminal records, something many community-based nonprofits are unable to do. Some grantees who do not have attorneys on staff even refer complex cases to WNA events.

USCIS requires that any attorney who assists in the preparation of an application also enter his or her appearance as the attorney of record. Outside of citizenship workshops, attorneys are required to write a cover letter, respond to any requests for evidence, and accompany the client to the interview, which is significantly more costly for applicants. However, USCIS makes a specific exception to this requirement for organized pro bono events like Citizenship Day. Attendees who would likely not fare well without counsel present at their interview leave with a copy WNA’s extensive attorney referral list to make sure that they can find the support they need.

Getting the word out

WNA conducts outreach in collaboration with its grantees and through extensive media campaigns. To promote its events this year, WNA ran 22 web-based ads, 28 print ads, and 722 occurrences of radio and TV ads. These were placed with 39 different ethnic media organizations statewide. Some additional ads ran in anticipation of the originally scheduled April 11 Citizenship Day, but these ad runs were cut short once the event was cancelled.

Making improvements

In August 2019, several members of the OneAmerica WNA program staff attended the New Americans Campaign annual conference. While there, staff experienced a new citizenship clinic model in action. Traditionally, attendees move through different stations at the event venue and get a different service at each station, such as screening, form-filling, and legal review. In this alternate model, attendees are stationary, and instead the volunteers come and go from the participant's table. This model creates a more participant-centered experience. As a result of this experience, WNA committed to implementing that clinic design for one of the citizenship events in FY20.

One of the requirements for this event design is to have a space large enough to hold all of the applicants and all of the volunteers in one room. The conference rooms at the Sea-Tac airport were the perfect fit. Other logistical changes included how to monitor applicant progress and the movement of volunteers, to make sure that the right kind of volunteer was meeting with each applicant. Increasing the volunteer to applicant ratio also reduced the amount of time applicants would spend sitting alone and waiting. WNA had to create new volunteer roles, and retrain all returning volunteers so that they would know what to do in this new setup. The team rose to the challenge. Longtime volunteers were full of praise for the new model, and applicants that day also gave positive feedback on their experience.



OneAmerica staff and volunteers with Sam Cho, Commissioner at the Port of Seattle, and Luis Navarro, Director of Workforce Development Programs Office of Equity, Diversity & Inclusion for the Port of Seattle at the SeaTac Clinic on February 22

Araceli Hernandez attended a Washington New Americans citizenship event in SeaTac on February 22, 2020. Her biometrics appointment was scheduled for the week USCIS closed due to COVID-19, and she is still waiting for her interview appointment.

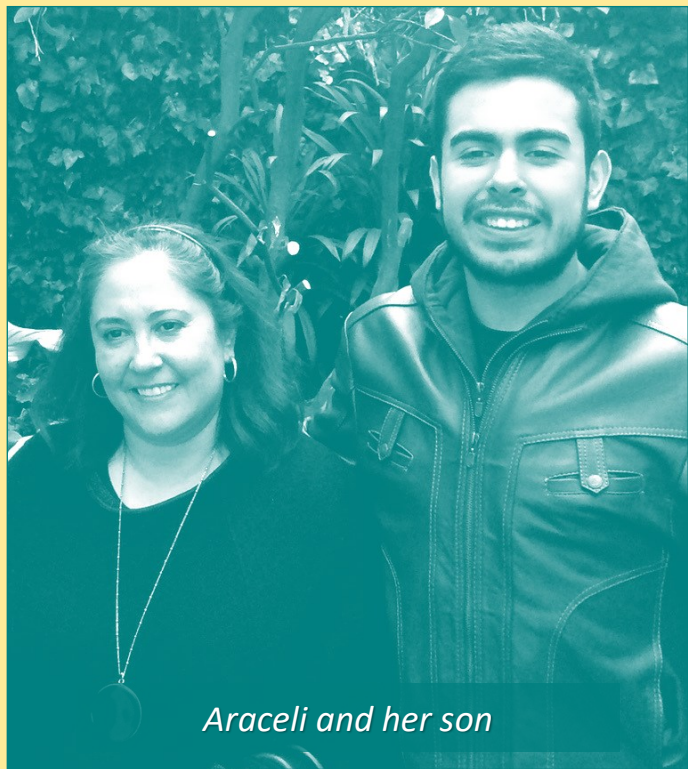
I came to the United States 24 years ago, and it took me 20 years to get my green card. During that time, I thought I would never get my green card. Now I can't believe that I will be able to become a citizen.

[At the event] I was treated so very well, and all the volunteers and staff helped me understand what my day was going to be like, and about the naturalization process. I felt super-supported and assured. It has been the greatest help I have received in many years. I want to become a citizen to feel safer, and to be able to vote in the country where I have spent more than half of my life. Becoming a citizen will be one of the most important accomplishments of my life.

Even after I attended the clinic, I received follow-up calls and texts from the staff to make sure everything was going well, and to give me updates on USCIS soon after the COVID-19 outbreak. It feels like they are accompanying me through every step. I

know that it would have been too expensive for me to get help with a private attorney, so I am grateful that a program like Washington New Americans exists.

The day of my oath ceremony: I imagine it as a day of liberation after over 20 years of uncertainty with a vulnerable immigrant status. The uncertainty affected me and my family in so many ways. I feel that I will be able to reach my full potential and creativity with my new status as a U.S. citizen. I will also be able to continue to fight for immigrant rights and contribute to the movement with my vote.



Araceli and her son

Caty Padilla is the director of Nuestra Casa, an outreach grantee partner in the Washington New Americans Program. In June of 2019, she attended a citizenship clinic both as a staff member and as an applicant. This year, she became a U.S. citizen.



naturalization process so that she could have firsthand experience to share with any of her future students. Caty naturalized successfully in February, 2020. Caty is excited to be able to vote and help educate others on the importance of civic engagement.

Caty Padilla was born in La Barca, Jalisco, Mexico and had been a Legal Permanent Resident for about 6 years. She joined Nuestra Casa back in 2018 as the Director. In 2017, Nuestra Casa, located in Sunnyside, had become a member of the Washington New Americans Program grantee group.

Due to a change in staff she ended up leading a cohort of about 25 students in Nuestra Casa's citizenship preparation program, in addition to her Director duties. She was so impressed with the students' dedication to better the lives of their family through naturalization. She had students driving from up to an hour away to take the class twice a week. During one of the class sessions she shared with the students that their dedication had motivated her to apply for her own citizenship. The students couldn't believe she was not already a citizen!

On June 15, 2019 (FY19), Nuestra Casa co-hosted a clinic in Sunnyside with OneAmerica, and Caty received help completing her naturalization application during that event. She wanted to be able to go through the

WNA Grantees

Half of WNA's funding goes to its grantees. Grantees provide free and reduced-fee immigration services to LPRs across the state. While there are several such service providers in the greater Seattle area, these services are harder to come by in other areas, especially in Eastern Washington. The grantee component of the WNA program is critical to extending access to naturalization.

In FY2020, WNA had 16 grantees across the state. Of these, 13 were under a service contract, providing legal services and civics education. The remaining 3 were under outreach contracts because they do not have the necessary staff and accreditation to provide legal services. They support the WNA program by educating their communities about citizenship and the rights of LPRs, providing civics classes, and promoting WNA's citizenship events. One of these outreach grantees has recently earned Department of Justice (DOJ) recognition, which will allow them to start providing legal services in their community once they develop their service program.

This year, WNA grantees had a combined total of:

7,531 clients served

1,575 intakes completed

1,023 naturalization applications completed

312 fee waiver applications completed

42 reduced fee applications completed

543 children eligible to derive citizenship upon approval of their parent's naturalization application

891 unduplicated civics students

91 countries of origin

52 languages spoken

112 outreach events conducted

In addition to grant funding, WNA grantees also received:

7 legal trainings from the WNA staff attorney and other experts

\$4,302.84 in Training and Development funds, which could be used for registration and travel to conferences, registration for in-person and online trainings, and access to other resources and memberships

NAME	SERVICES	LOCATION	AREAS SERVED
Asian Counseling and Referral Service	Naturalization services, civics education	Seattle	King, Pierce, and Snohomish Counties
Chinese Information and Service Center	Naturalization services, civics education	Seattle	King County
The Community for the Advancement of Family Education	Outreach	Wenatchee	North Central Washington
Hand in Hand Immigration Services	Naturalization services, civics education	Wenatchee	Chelan, Douglas, and Okanogan Counties
Horn of Africa Services	Naturalization services, civics education	Seattle	Seattle and King County
Kitsap Immigrant Assistance Center	Naturalization services, civics education	Bremerton	Clallam, Jefferson, Kitsap, and north Mason Counties
Korean Community Service Center	Outreach, civics education	Edmonds	Seattle, North Seattle, Bellevue, Snohomish County
Korean Women's Association	Naturalization services, civics education	Tacoma	King, Pierce, and Snohomish Counties
La Casa Hogar	Naturalization services, civics education	Yakima	Benton, Chelan, Douglas, Franklin, Grant, Kittitas, Klickitat, Walla Walla, and Yakima Counties
Lutheran Community Services Northwest	Naturalization services	Seattle and Vancouver	Clark and King Counties
Nuestra Casa	Outreach, civics education	Sunnyside	South Central Washington - Yakima Valley
Northwest Immigrant Rights Project	Naturalization services, technical training	Granger	South Central Washington
Refugee & Immigrant Services Northwest	Naturalization services, civics education	Everett	Skagit, Snohomish, and Whatcom Counties
Tacoma Community House	Naturalization services, civics education	Tacoma	King, Kitsap, Pierce, and Thurston Counties
World Relief	Naturalization services	Kent	King, Pierce, and Snohomish Counties

The Benefits of WNA Funding

“If it weren't for WNA funding, clients with complex citizenship cases — including people with criminal convictions, people who are homeless, people with disabilities, and those whose cases contain complex legal issues — would have fewer avenues to accessing critical legal services from an organization with expertise in comprehensive immigration law.” - *Northwest Immigrant Rights Project*

“Our ESL and citizenship classes have been helped by the WNA funding. During the past year, we are able to expand the classes from five classes to seven classes every week, including four citizenship classes and three ESL classes.” - *Chinese Information and Service Center*

“The [additional] Training and Development funding allows staff to refresh, expand and deepen their knowledge of immigration law, which is later applied to actual client cases.” - *Tacoma Community House*

“If it weren't for the WNA Program, ACRS wouldn't have been able to set up a new platform so quickly to start providing remote services [after the outbreak of COVID-19].” - *Asian Counseling and Referral Service*

“WNA continues to play a major role in helping clients who are ineligible to receive public benefits or simply afraid to apply for public benefits due to the public charge.” - *Refugee and Immigrant Services Northwest*

“WNA funding has helped us preserve the on-staff expertise that we have. The reality is that without this grant, we would have to scramble to find an alternate funding source or would have to cut an experienced staff person, losing years of expertise.” - *World Relief Seattle*

“If it weren't for the WNA Program, our rural community and county would not have as much access and resources for individuals to apply successfully for naturalization.” - *Nuestra Casa*

“WNA has helped our program by engaging us and teaching us about the naturalization process. The hands-on experience through Citizenship days were most valuable for capacity building of our staff and volunteers.” - *The Community for the Advancement of Family Education*



Mr. Y and his family reunited with his extended family in the U.S. in December of 2012. Before immigrating to the U.S., Mr. Y had heard a lot about the rights and freedoms of U.S. citizens from his relatives who were already here, such as the right to vote for government leaders and the right to express personal opinions. These were rights he did not have in his home country.

He dreamed of becoming a U.S. citizen and earning the rights of a U.S. citizen, and so Mr. Y contacted KWA staff to participate in our citizenship class when he heard about it in 2018. Even though he needed to drive about 30 minutes to the class each week, he seldom missed a day of class.

Mr. Y applied for naturalization after about a year of learning in our citizenship class. In October 2019, Mr. Y excitedly called us to inform us that he passed all of the citizenship tests and became a naturalized U.S. citizen, and that he could hardly wait to participate in voting for the President and other government positions this year.

- *Korean Women's Association*

G.G. came to the U.S. in 2010. She did not apply for U.S citizenship after the five years because she was suffering from a learning disability and would not able to pass the test. She thought she could never be a U.S citizen.

She meet staff at our Bellingham office and asked if there was any way she could apply for U.S citizenship, with zero English skills. She was enrolled in the WNA program and referred to a licensed psychologist who tested her and filled out a disability waiver (N-648) for her. Once she found out that her interview had been scheduled, she met with Bellingham staff to go over the interview process and prepare for the interview. She became a citizen and received her certificate of citizenship on March 15, 2020.

- *Refugee and Immigrant Services Northwest*

Andres and Sandra, husband and wife, have lived and worked in the Yakima Valley for over 30 years. Together they have raised their 10 children. They have both been LPRs for more than 20 years.

They came to La Casa seeking support with the naturalization process. Because of their age and number of years as LPRs they are both eligible for the English language exemption. When they came to La Casa to complete their naturalization application, two of their teenage granddaughters came with them. They shared how their evenings are now devoted to studying the U.S. History/civics questions. Navigating the naturalization process has been a learning experience not only for Andres and Sandra but also for the entire family, who encourages and supports them to pursue their goal of becoming U.S. citizens.

When asked why they want to become U.S. citizens, Andres quickly replied "*porque esta ya es nuestra casa*" (because this is already our home). For many immigrants like Andres and Sandra, who have called the U.S. home for many years, applying for naturalization is a way to celebrate and formalize that they are at home.

- *La Casa Hogar*

M. is a 69-year-old that was referred to NWIRP-Granger by La Casa Hogar, which is located in Sunnyside. She had received help from NWIRP in 1997. At that time, she was picked up by ICE in a warehouse raid where she worked, and was placed in removal proceedings. M. was abused and abandoned by her husband.

We helped M. prepare for her naturalization interview. She was so nervous during the interview that she did not remember her phone number, had a hard time remembering dates, brought the wrong paperwork with her, and was shaking so badly that I could see her hands turning white from holding the chair she was sitting on.

Regardless, she passed her interview and was scheduled for her oath ceremony on March 13, 2020, the day when USCIS offices were shut down due to the pandemic. Her ceremony was rescheduled and she finally received her citizenship certificate on July 9, 2020. She called to let me know how grateful she is for all of the assistance that we provided to her and her family.

- *Northwest Immigrant Rights Project*

Antonio has been married for 55 years and has 14 adult kids, 37 grandchildren, and 6 great grandchildren. He was so excited to become a U.S. Citizen in February 2020, and proud that he saved his money to pay full fee.

I was present during the interview, and am proud to say that he not only impressed me but also the officer. Mr. Martinez remembered all of the N-400 questions, including all of the information about his 14 kids. Every time he responded with a yes he would say, "Yes, sir, dear officer."

- *Hand in Hand Immigration Services*



G. is a 57 year-old Hispanic female applicant that came to our office to talk about green card renewal. She had been an LPR for over two decades. I gave her information about the green card renewal process and asked if she had thought about applying for naturalization. She said she did want to become a U.S. citizen one day.

I informed her that she qualified for Spanish interpretation due to her age and her time as an LPR. She explained that she wanted to do it in English, because it was one of the goals she wanted to accomplish in life: if she was to become a U.S. citizen, she wanted to show herself she could do it in English. But, she was afraid her English was not good enough.

I suggested trying having a conversation between us. I would pretend to be a USCIS officer and ask her questions, just for fun. She agreed.

We talked, and she did well, and was confident enough with her English skills that she decided to start her citizenship application instead of filing for a green card renewal. Her application was submitted, she passed her interview, and was extremely happy when we received her oath ceremony appointment. G. is now a proud U.S. citizen.

- *Lutheran Community Services Northwest Vancouver*

Civics Education

Another significant hurdle that LPRs face when applying for naturalization is preparing for the civics exam. Most applicants have to study 100 preset questions in English, and must answer 6 out of 10 correctly at their interview in order to pass. Certain exemptions, based on a combination of an applicant's age and how many years they have been an LPR, allow applicants to take the test in their native language, or even study a reduced list of 20 questions.

Most WNA grantees have a civics education component in their program, uniquely tailored to meet the needs of their communities, and often closely tied to other aspects of naturalization preparation and immigrant integration. Some grantees conduct a mock-interview, including a civics test, with their clients to help them prepare. Many have combined ESL and civics courses, while others offer civics classes in clients' native language and offer English classes separately. Some grantees serve communities where many people do not speak English but also do not know how to read and write in their native language. These grantees spend months teaching clients basic literacy before they can even begin to prepare them for the civics portion of their naturalization exam. Due to the diversity of client needs, some grantees find it more effective to offer one-on-one tutoring, while others are able to lead classes for groups as large as 60 students.



One of our classes mostly consisted of one large family. Danil and Lyubov were the parents and, along with Veronika, Olga, Anatoliy, Danil Jr, Angelina, Aleksandr and Albina, they all attended the class. They are refugees from Kazakhstan. This picture shows their class with one of our instructors.

Only one of them, Veronika, was able to naturalize because she applied first, and the interview was scheduled before the stay at home orders were issued. Most of the others' interviews were cancelled, and now they are waiting to have them rescheduled. They are victims of the pandemic in terms of how it has disrupted the naturalization process.

- Lutheran Community Services Northwest Vancouver



One of our students successfully passed the naturalization interview before the COVID-19 pandemic. She had studied at CISC for almost two years to prepare for the interview. She only knew some basic English and civics knowledge before she started the classes at CISC. However, she had learned all the 100 civics questions and N-400 questions within a year, and she was able to have English conversations with our mock interview teachers, answering all the questions correctly. Here she is when she came back to CISC to share her interview experience with current students.

- *Chinese Information and Service Center*

This fiscal year, 301 unduplicated students attended our citizenship classes. Our students range in age from 35 to 50 years old, and they are predominantly from Mexico. Most of them speak Spanish; some also speak English as a second language. The average English class size is 20-25 students, and the average class size in Spanish is 35-40 students.

We teach our students the 100 civics questions in English and Spanish, and prepare them for the written portion of the test. Most of them find the U.S. history portion to be the most interesting. We also prepare our students for the naturalization interview, during which they will have to answer questions about their background and their naturalization application. We dedicate up to 80 hours of civics education to each student, or as needed. We have over 12 active tutors that facilitate small group preparedness or 1-on-1 sessions as needed.

- *Hand in Hand Immigration Services*

Julie* is from the mountains of the Philippines and went to school only through the 3rd grade. She had grandparents who taught her to read and write. Her husband, now deceased, was in the U.S. military and taught her English and tried to help her improve her writing. She understands English well, but her accent is very heavy.

It became clear that intensive help with reading and writing would have to be the first step. This was accomplished with a former tutor who used civics to teach reading and writing skills. Julie made progress in this, but also had serious memory issues. A second tutor educated herself in the use of memory devices involving all of the five senses, constant repetition and a little fun. A total of about 60 hours of instruction just for this client!

Now when this client is rescheduled for her interview, which was cancelled due to COVID-19, she will be ready. This week she answered 97 out of 100 civics questions! Her last sessions will help her with the pronunciations of several words that she needs to use to tell her story.

- *Kitsap Immigrant Assistance Center*

*Name has been changed

The Impacts of COVID-19



Dorothy, a Tacoma Community House client, at a socially distant oath ceremony

The outbreak of COVID-19 had a significant effect on the WNA program. We canceled the Citizenship Day scheduled for April 11 in Tacoma, Vancouver, and Yakima, as well as a clinic in Pasco scheduled for June 13. Those events were slated to serve more than 200 people. WNA also suspended the monthly clinics in partnership with Perkins Coie. Grantees transitioned to remote work or stopped seeing clients in person. All citizenship providers had to figure out how to serve applicants either remotely or in a safe, socially distant way.

In addition to reducing the number of people served by the WNA program, the COVID-19 pandemic also had a negative impact on people waiting to naturalize. As described in the FY19 Final Report, processing times for citizenship applications had reached an all-time high, with Seattle-based applicants waiting up to 18 months between when they submitted their application and when they had their naturalization interview.

Processing times in Seattle had just begun to come down when, due to COVID-19, USCIS closed all of its offices from mid-March until June 4. People who were scheduled for interviews during that closure are still waiting to be rescheduled. People who were scheduled to take their oath (having already passed the interview, but not yet officially naturalized) also continue to wait to complete the naturalization process. So far, USCIS has refused to conduct remote oath ceremonies.

The WNA grantees had to contend with a number of challenges in order to keep serving citizenship applicants. These included the temporary closure of USCIS offices, confusion and misinformation among their clients, having to fill other service voids that arose due to the virus, and developing a remote service model accessible to those with limited digital literacy and technology access.

This pandemic has a big impact in everybody's life. Some clients were ready to file the applications but changed their minds because they lost jobs suddenly. Some might lose their eligibility because their spouse passed away. The communication between USCIS and clients is slower and more ineffective than before.

- *Asian Counseling and Referral Service*

Transition to remote services has been difficult for clients and staff alike. In the beginning, many clients chose to reschedule and/or postpone their appointments until in-person service resume. However, with the extension of the "stay home, stay healthy" initiative and continued closure, more and more clients started to move forward with their cases. - *Tacoma Community House*

Many clients' interviews got cancelled due to the COVID-19, and the USCIS office was closed during the months of March-June. The delayed citizenship interviews created confusion and lack of information updates for these folks. We had a couple of clients that were scheduled for an interview on the day of closure.

- *Korean Community Service Center*

In partnership with Nuestra Casa in Sunnyside, La Casa launched into Spanish messaging on the first day of the Yakima Health District's shelter-in-place announcement. We completed numerous TV & radio interviews to urgently ask our community to stay home. We quickly found that Spanish-speaking communities did not receive the same amount and depth of messaging as our English-speaking neighbors.

- *La Casa Hogar*

Completing and submitting applications takes much longer because of the various factors and logistics involved with working remotely. It can take anywhere from a few days to two weeks from the time I complete an application to the time I mail it to USCIS, because most of our clients do not have computers, printers and scanners at home. I usually complete the application, mail it to them, they review it, sign it and either mail back the signature pages or stop by the office briefly to drop them off. This is vastly different from when clients would come to the office and I would complete the application within 2-3 hours and mail it out the same day.

- *Lutheran Community Services Northwest Seattle*

Though the challenges created by COVID-19 are easy to list, the WNA program also turned this into an opportunity to innovate and reinvest. In lieu of the annual grantee convening that had been scheduled for March 13, the grantees attended a remote COVID-response forum on April 17. They shared the challenges they faced and solutions they were developing to be able to continue to provide services while adhering to public health guidelines. All grantees have continued to provide services throughout this period. From this meeting and ensuing conversations, it is clear that one of the benefits of the WNA program is the network of support that it creates for grantee members.

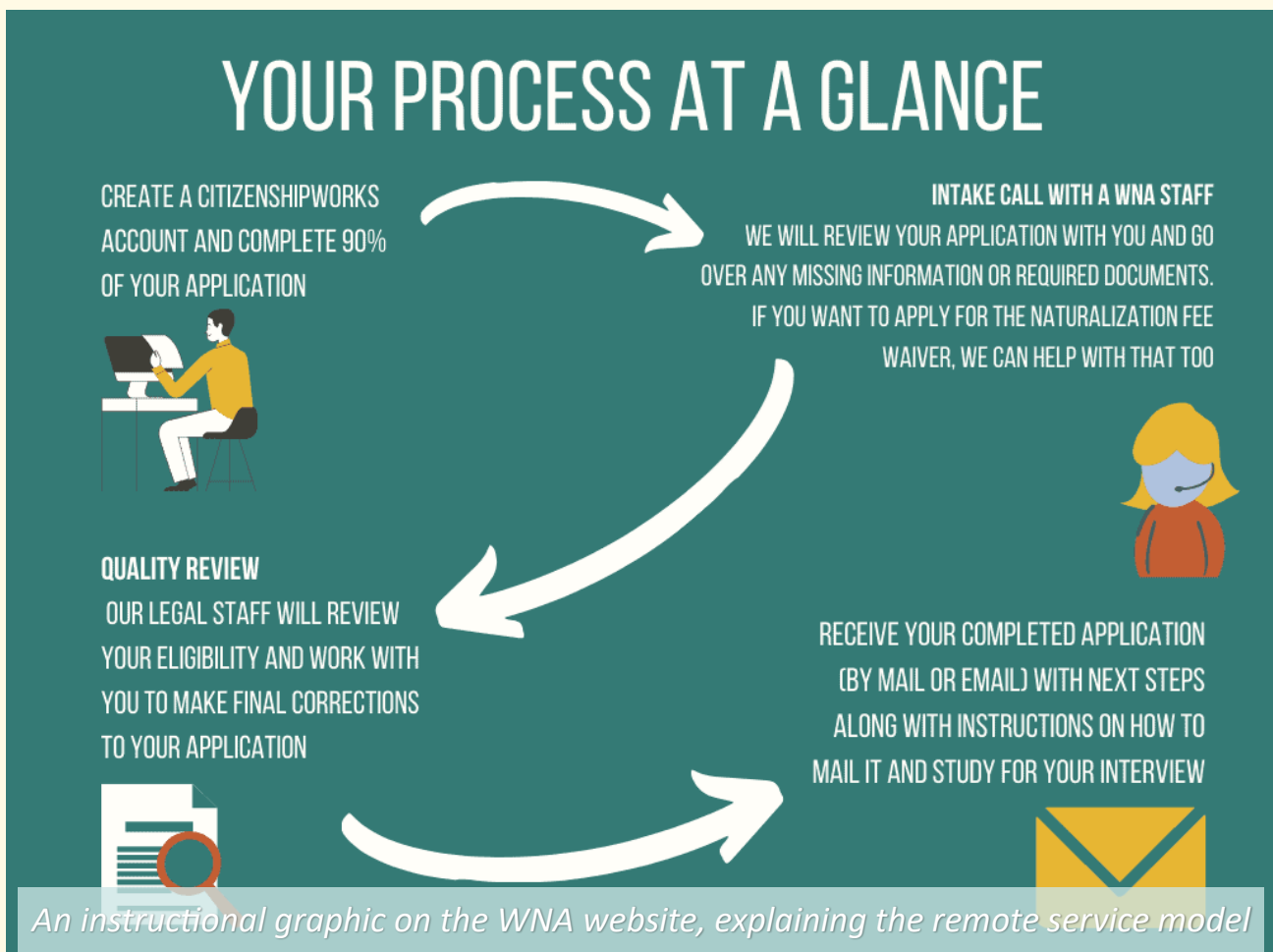
Relief funding for grantees

More than \$30,000 that had been allocated for in-person citizenship events and other no-longer-relevant budget categories was redistributed to the grantees to help them adjust to providing remote services. These funds were put towards things like meeting the technology needs required to establish remote services, covering increased staff hours required for COVID response, and more.

New ways to serve

OneAmerica also responded to these changes with internal innovations. In the last quarter of the fiscal year, OneAmerica developed and implemented a remote service program to supplement the decrease in services caused by event cancellations. This is a significant departure from the traditional in-person group clinics.

The remote service model relies on CitizenshipWorks, a free, web-based platform clients can use to complete their own applications using a smartphone or a computer. OneAmerica legal staff meet with applicants via videoconference or phone call for legal consultation and final application review. Applicants served through this model must be comfortable using a smartphone or computer, which is not the case for some in Washington’s immigrant community. However, in the long term, this model will help expand the reach of the WNA program, making services accessible to people regardless of their location or ability to travel.



Rosa Martinez Caceres is originally from Honduras, and lives in Everett with her family. She worked as a warehouse associate, but was laid off in the spring of 2020 due to COVID-19. She had already been studying for the civics exam for about a year, and felt ready to start her citizenship application. Rosa became the first person to be served through OneAmerica's new remote service model using CitizenshipWorks. She shared what it was like to be the first participant in the remote service model.



I first came to the U.S. in 1996. The situation in Honduras was very hard at that time. There was so much violence and no job opportunities. I came by myself when I was 36 years old. It took a lot of courage to leave behind my family, all my brothers and sisters, my roots. I didn't know even a word of English when I first arrived. Even when people said to me, "Hi, how are you?" I didn't know how to respond.

I go to Honduras to see my siblings every so often. The last time was about 8 months ago. [Coming back,] the airport lines were so long for residents. I was waiting and waiting to leave the airport. And I said to myself, "one day, one day that will be me passing through the line for U.S. citizens."

I decided to apply for citizenship because a girl at work told me there was a program called WNA, and said I should go to their events to apply for citizenship. But then COVID came, and I thought to myself, "oh no, they won't be able to [have events] anymore!"

My experience with applying for citizenship with OneAmerica was spectacular. It is the best thing that has ever happened to me! To be here locked up in

the apartment due to COVID, the fact that I was able to get help with my citizenship is amazing.

I have many nieces and nephews who are citizens, and they encouraged me to apply. "Tia, tu puedes!" they said. My son encouraged me too, and he helped me do the application online. I feel so lucky to be the first person to do this via videoconference. I told my friends, I am really blessed to get this kind of help, all at no cost.

I recommend this program 100%. I hope more people like me can do what I did! I want to help others and encourage them to do the same. I know a lady who told me once, "no, citizenship doesn't interest me; I've had my green card for 20 years." And to that I say, "wow, not me."

Defending Access to Citizenship

Like 2019, this year brought many federal policy changes that made it more difficult for LPRs to become citizens. The WNA program does more than provide direct assistance to applicants. With a direct connection to the immigrant community, WNA and its grantees are experts in the impact of enacted and proposed policies have on those they serve. More and more, it is necessary to advocate at the federal and local level to protect immigrant rights and ensure fair access to naturalization.

One particularly tough case for us was with a client named Margarito. He was 58 years old and had been an LPR for 30 years. We filed his N-400 in November of 2018.

His first interview was scheduled for February of 2019, but it was cancelled. He eventually had his interview on March 25, 2019. He passed the exam, but the USCIS officer requested more evidence before making a ruling. The evidence was for a minor traffic accident that had occurred about 30 years ago in California.

We responded to several notices of continuance. Over a year after his interview, and over 18 months after submitting his application, Margarito was finally scheduled for an oath ceremony on July 9, 2020. Tragically, while waiting for this news, Margarito contracted COVID-19. He passed away on May 9, before he could become a citizen. We had to withdraw his N-400 and submit his death certificate.

- *Hand in Hand Immigration Services*

- USCIS officers have been more carefully scrutinizing applicants' cases and digging deeper into their immigration history. Interview times have doubled in length, from 20-30 minutes to 45-60 minutes¹, and USCIS is requiring more written evidence than they have in previous years. As a result, naturalization service providers like WNA and its grantees have started asking applicants to obtain their entire immigration file as part of the pre-application screening process. These files can take months to procure, and also means that the screening and application process takes longer.
- Two damaging policies enacted in 2018 continue to have visible effects. One policy gives immigration officers more discretion to deny applications outright, without giving the applicant a chance to submit more evidence. The other policy makes it more likely that USCIS will send applicants to deportation proceedings if their citizenship application is denied on good moral character grounds. Naturalization service providers are now being much more cautious about which clients they allow to apply.
- A stricter "public charge" rule went into effect in February 2020, making it much harder for low-income immigrants to get green cards. While the rule doesn't directly affect most naturalization applicants, widespread confusion over this proposal caused many immigrant families to disenroll from programs for which they were eligible. WNA witnessed this firsthand; many event participants who would have been able to use a means-tested benefit to qualify for a fee waiver were unable to do so because they had disenrolled from that benefit out of fear.
- In late 2019, the government announced a plan to restrict eligibility for fee waivers and require applicants to submit more burdensome paperwork to qualify. WNA staff and grantees led a community-wide effort to submit more than 300 public comments opposing the rule. The rule was ultimately enacted in December 2019, but a week later, OneAmerica, City of Seattle and other organizations successfully won a lawsuit stopping the policy from going into effect.

¹ Migration Policy Institute, "A Rockier Road to U.S. Citizenship? Findings of a Survey on Changing Naturalization Procedures," 2020. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/changing-uscis-naturalization-procedures>

² Protect Democracy, "City of Seattle v. DHS," 2019. <https://protectdemocracy.org/project/city-of-seattle-v-dhs/>

Looking to FY21

Next Year's Challenges

In spring 2020, the federal government announced they would increase the naturalization fee from \$725 to \$1,170, and eliminate all fee waivers. If enacted, this change would pulverize access to naturalization. An estimated more than 80% of WNA's existing clientele would not be able to afford to apply for citizenship – even though they meet all the legal requirements. WNA member organizations are committed to fighting these changes with federal advocacy, and litigation if necessary.

The COVID-19 pandemic poses another challenge for the WNA program. After years delivering efficient, in-person clinics for 100 or more applicants at a time, public health guidelines make this impossible. Instead, the only options are to help clients 1:1 remotely via phone and computer, or occasionally in-person with socially distant protocols in place. Many clients don't have access to technology like internet access or a computer or printer/scanner at home, or lack the digital literacy necessary to use these tools. Using U.S. mail or in-person drop boxes to exchange documents and obtain signatures make each case take much longer.

Many applicants are underemployed or unemployed due to the pandemic, have dwindling savings, and can't afford the filing fee. Even those who still have an income are hesitant to spend \$725 on citizenship because they're not sure whether they or someone in their family could be laid off in the future.

"Our students are concerned about the backlogs in case adjudication due to the pandemic and the proposed fee increases to the naturalization application."
- *La Casa Hogar*

"Far and away the biggest concern is the expected fee hikes and elimination of the fee waiver. The cost will make naturalization inaccessible for a good deal of our clientele. This is further exacerbated by the fact that many of our potential clients are struggling financially due to COVID-19."
- *World Relief Seattle*

"Costs have always been a barrier, but with many experiencing increased economic hardship because of the pandemic it will most likely be an even bigger factor this year."
- *Nuestra Casa*

Conclusion

The political climate, and the health and economic crises created by COVID-19 has sown unprecedented uncertainty and fear in immigrant communities. It's more important than ever that Washington continue to invest in trusted, competent immigration legal assistance.

Achieving citizenship drives up wages, home-ownership rates, access to financial aid for education and participation in the formal financial system. Naturalized citizens are 1.93 times more likely to own a home than non-citizen immigrants,¹ and poverty rates among naturalized citizens are six percentage points lower than legal permanent residents.²

We're determined to face the challenges ahead, and we're grateful for the State of Washington's commitment to making citizenship accessible. On behalf of OneAmerica, the 16 grantee organizations, and community partners across the state, thank you for your continued support for the Washington New Americans program. It is an investment in Washington's future.

¹ Callis, Bob & Melissa Kresin, "Moving to America, Moving to Homeownership," *U.S. Census Bureau*, (2003), Web.

² Shierholz, Heidi. "The Effects of Citizenship on Family Income and Poverty." *Economic Policy Institute Briefing Paper #256*, February 24, 2010. Web.

