

So, you have clients who wish to become naturalized U.S. Citizens...what do they need to know?

1 Are they eligible? In order to apply for naturalization, applicants must:

- Be at least 18 years old at the time of filing form N-400, the application for Naturalization
- Be a permanent resident (have a "green card") for at least 5 years (3 years if they are married to a U.S. citizen.)
- Show that they have lived for at least 3 months in the state or USCIS district where they will apply.
- Demonstrate continuous residence in the United States for at least 5 years immediately preceding the date of filing Form N-400.
- Show that they have been physically present in the United States for at least 30 months out of the 5 years immediately preceding the date of filing Form N-400.
- Be able to read, write, and speak basic English (the test is written at NALS Level 2)

Exceptions to this requirement:

If a person is 55 years or older and has been a permanent resident for at least 15 years; or is 50 years or older and has been a permanent resident for at least 20 years, they do not have to show English ability, and will take the interview in their L1.

If a person has a permanent physical or mental impairment that makes the individual unable to fulfill these requirements, they may be exempt from the English requirement.

- Have a basic understanding of U.S. history and government (civics).

Exceptions to this requirement:

If a person is 55 years or older and has been a permanent resident for at least 15 years; or is 50 years or older and has been a permanent resident for at least 20 years, they will take exam in their L1.

If a person has a permanent physical or mental impairment that makes the individual unable to fulfill these requirements, they may be exempt from the civics requirement.

- Be a person of good moral character.
- Demonstrate an attachment to the principles and ideals of the U.S. Constitution.

The cost for Naturalization is \$680. This includes application, biometrics, background check, and interview/testing: An applicant has two chances to pass with one application.

Montgomery College offers Citizenship Preparation Classes, as does Baltimore City Community College; both programs are funded and highly regarded by USCIS. (The Montgomery College schedule is included.)

Some organizations have Citizenship preparation classes in other languages, but as the interview and exam is held completely in English, except for those exempt (see above), this can be counter-productive for the learner.

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2 What to expect at the interview

- When someone arrives at the USCIS office for their interview, the first thing they will do is go through security. They will need a picture I.D. and their appointment letter. After passing through security, they will check in with a USCIS agent, and then will be told to take a seat.
- An officer will call the applicant's name and the interview begins immediately...with small talk. Having conversational English skills is essential.
- The applicant will be taken to an office and before sitting down, will be placed under oath. The ability to understand commands, such as please stand, raise your right hand, repeat after me, etc. is also essential for success.
- The officer will then review the applicants N-400 application with them, asking many of the same questions that were asked on the N-400 form. The interview may or may not be videotaped. The officers typically spend some time reviewing work and travel history, any criminal matters and prior immigration history. They may also ask about family members and their immigration status.
- The second portion of the interview will be the naturalization examination. An applicant will be asked to write a sentence in English and to read a sentence in English. They will be asked civics questions and you have to score a 60% to pass. If they get six answers right, the examiner usually stops asking questions.
- The final portion of the interview will concern the oath of allegiance. Some officers will ask applicants to explain in their own words what the oath means to them. Others will read questions about the oath and write down the applicants' oral answers. Some applicants have been asked read the oath out loud and then explain what it means. The oath is an important part of the interview and some people have had their citizenship denied or delayed because they could not explain the oath.
- If an applicant passes the civics exam and everything goes smoothly with the interview, they will receive a form that says (1) they appeared for the interview; and, (2) their application has been recommended for approval. If there is space, they may be sworn in as a U.S. citizen on the day of the interview.
- If an applicant passes, and there is no space on the day for the oath, they will receive a letter about 3-6 weeks later directing them to the oath ceremony. Important note: If an applicant passes the test and interview, and is not sworn in on the same day, they are not a U.S. Citizen. They must return for the Oath Ceremony.
- If an applicant fails, they will receive a letter to return for a second chance, 1-3 months later

So, you have clients who wish to become naturalized U.S. Citizens...How can you help them?

Do:

- 1 **Work on small talk:** Having conversational English skills is essential for success during the naturalization interview and test.
- 2 **Work on following commands:** The applicant will need to understand commands, such as follow me, please stand, raise your right hand, repeat after me, etc.
- 3 **Work on interview skills:** Officers will review the applicants N-400 application with them, asking many of the same questions that were asked on the N-400 form. The interview may or may not be videotaped. The officers typically spend some time reviewing work and travel history, any criminal matters and prior immigration history. They may also ask about family members and their immigration status. Being able to answer questions clearly, and truthfully, is a key to success during the interview.
- 4 **Work on U.S. history and government:** The second portion of the interview will be the naturalization examination. An applicant will be asked to write a sentence in English and to read a sentence in English. They will be asked civics questions and you have to score a 60% to pass. If they get six answers right, the examiner usually stops asking questions.

Do Not:

- 1 **Complete the N-400 application form for the applicants:** Even if you understand the form completely, and the student can give you all the information needed, it is not advisable to be completing applications for people.
- 2 **Do not give out any legal advice:** If a client needs legal advice on immigration matters, make sure that the person they rely on is authorized to give legal advice. Only an attorney or an accredited representative working for a Board of Immigration Appeals-recognized organization can give legal advice. **This includes advice on how to complete the N-400 application.** The Internet, newspapers, radio, community bulletin boards and storefronts are filled with advertisements offering immigration help. Not all of this information is from attorneys and accredited representatives. There is a lot of information that comes from organizations and individuals who are not authorized to give legal advice, such as "notarios" and other unauthorized representatives. The wrong help can hurt. If you are a Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) recognized organization...go for it! Montgomery College works with BIA representative Catholic Charities to provide legal immigration help, for free, to our clients. Please refer your clients to us if they need free legal immigration help.

