

## **NEWCOMERS LEARN IMMIGRATION RULES U.S. POLICY BECAME MORE COMPLEX AFTER SEPT. 11, SOME SAY**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Alba Acosta lives in Caracas, Venezuela, but owns a summer home in Weston. She has been spending the summer months here for several years without problems, but now, she is just a little bit worried.

With the passing of the Patriot Act legislation following the September 11 attacks, Acosta and many other immigrants are concerned about changing immigration procedures that can reduce the amount of time they are allowed to stay here, or may prevent them from coming altogether.

"I have never had a problem coming here for the summer before," Acosta said. "But with the changes, it is important for us to learn the new laws of the United States."

Acosta joined nearly 100 area residents at an Immigration Forum on August 8 sponsored by the newly formed Weston Business Chamber of Commerce. The forum was held at The Sagement School in Weston.

Temporary immigrants such as Acosta don't need to worry if they can show that they have a vacation house here according to Daniel N. Vara, Jr, the Chief Legal Officer for the Miami District of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service who was the featured speaker at the forum.

Vara was referring to a new policy under the act that changes the previous practice of allowing vacationers and non-residents to automatically receive permission to remain in the country for six months up to one year. Now, such immigrants are granted only 30 days unless they can provide a compelling reason why they should stay longer, Vara explained.

"If you show that you have a vacation house here, or have an itinerary that takes you to Disney World and St. Louis and Los Angeles and it is valid that you need more than 30 days, you will get it," he said. "But if you come in with just general plans, you won't get it."

Others were more concerned about residency and other immigration problems. "I have been struggling with immigration problems for 13 years," said Hank Huyding of Weston who relocated to south Florida from the Netherlands. "You have to find a sponsor who is willing to start the application process for you," Huyding explained. "I never succeeded in finding a sponsor, maybe due to my age." Huyding and his wife Christine retired to the U.S. after a 32-year career with the Dutch navy.

Huyding said that he has supported his family through freelance work as an account manager and working in information technology.

"Finally my daughter became a citizen and she sponsored us for permanent residency," Huyding said. Meanwhile, the long wait was costly. "We ate our daughter's inheritance," he said.

The frustration has not dimmed the Huyding's enthusiasm for living in the U.S. "We like it here. This country has much to offer," he said.

"We think that the immigration law is fair," Christine Huyding added. "At least there is a law."

But, those laws can be difficult to understand for those who are new to the country and may have difficulty with the legal language. "The laws are not clear," said Heinz Karrer of Pembroke Pines who said that he attended the session to learn more about the legal procedures.

"The procedures should be addressed in a more understandable way," he said. "The local immigration office has the discretion to approve or not approve an application. They should let you know what to expect. That way you would save time and unnecessary work."

Karrer, who was born in Germany, emigrated to the U.S. from Venezuela three years ago. He owns an export business here and a business in Caracas. His wife, Waltraud, is here on a dependent visa and does not have permission to work in the United States.

September 11 changed procedures for many people who were in the process of obtaining a particular immigration status. "We really don't know how the immigration laws have changed since 9/11," said Norman Pelaez who came to Weston from Bogotá three years ago. "It is very important to get information. Some people have been trying to change their status but couldn't make it."

Vara acknowledged that the events of September 11 have changed immigration procedures. "We are a country of open borders and a society that welcomes more immigrants per year than all other countries combined," Vara said. "But we still have people who are not here to enjoy what we offer, but to harm the interests of the U.S. government."

Because of that, Vara said that we must be a more diligent and observant society. "We will have to pay the price," he explained.

More careful scrutiny of those seeking to enter the country along with those who seek residency, employment or citizenship means that the processes for all have slowed down. "Everything will be delayed until we get more staff or we streamline the process," he said.

Vara said that while most citizens support the increased security, many Americans have a schizophrenic attitude toward immigration. "They want us to arrest other aliens, but not 'my' alien," he said.

Defending the closer inspection of those coming into the country, Vara pointed out that all of the 19 hijackers and overstayed student visas.

Immigration policies also affect those who work with newly arrived immigrants. "My husband and I have an accounting office in Weston," explained Yesmin Valdivieso who was originally from Puerto Rico. "Residents, aliens and citizens have different requirements in filing their tax returns. Foreigners have to file different returns."

"Changes in procedures affect the whole relocation industry," said Rita Hernandez who is president of Premier Destination Services in Weston. Her company works with individuals and contracts with non-profit groups to help immigrants obtain driver's licenses and process immigration papers.

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