

# Amnesty Sale: The Medium Is the Tortilla

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With top officers wearing sombreros, immigration floats in Chinese New Year parades, fliers placed in packages of tortillas, free videotapes and other novel tactics, immigration officials are laboring to increase turnout as the nation's amnesty program for illegal aliens enters its last 10 weeks.

It is all part of an effort to reach the vast, heterogeneous immigrant underground that could be aided by the largest legalization program in history. And it marks the stretch drive in an effort officials admit will fall well short of their original estimates.

## Ethnic Advertising

Officials of the Immigration and Naturalization Service now expect perhaps 1.35 million applicants to file under the general amnesty provisions of Immigration Control and Reform Act of 1986. Originally, they had predicted two million general amnesty applicants.

Applications for seasonal agricultural workers and other specialized applicants may bring the total turnout near the two million mark.

Officials hope that advertising in ethnic news and entertainment media and gimmicks like the informational Spanish videotape that has been made available at Hispanic markets will help increase turnout. William Slattery, assistant commissioner for legalization of the immigration service said applications have been increasing for three weeks and increasing numbers of aliens have come in to pick up forms.

"We think the last-minute surge we expected is already starting," he said.

The 1986 immigration law offers the promise of legal status, or amnesty, to illegal aliens who can prove they resided in the United States continuously since Jan. 1, 1982. The application period began last May 5 and is to end this May 4. Bills are pending in the House and Senate, however, that would extend the program for a year. Immigration officials say they oppose those efforts.

Turnout is being watched carefully both as a way to gauge the program's success and because of its financial implications. The program is supposed to be financed by the \$185 fee paid by applicants. Some experts have warned that unless there is a late surge in applications, the immigration service will face the choice of cutting staff sizes or looking for other sources of revenue to support the

program. Mr. Slattery said he is confident the number of applicants will be sufficient to finance the program as planned.

In announcing their original estimates, officials said they expected two million immigrants to apply, and put the most optimistic estimate of possible applicants at 3.9 million. As of Feb. 25, however, the general amnesty program had attracted just over one million applicants. The 290,000 applicants under more lenient provisions for seasonal agricultural workers brought total to 1.3 million. But only the fees of the general amnesty applicants go to finance the program.

Critics say the new publicity campaign is coming too late to be effective, and that the immigration service needs to address fears that families may be split if some members qualify for amnesty and others do not. A recent report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace estimated that after the amnesty program is completed, illegal aliens will outnumber those granted amnesty by almost two to one.

### Tortillas and Boy Scouts

Whatever the reason for the dearth of applications, immigration officials have been scrambling to come up with innovative approaches to increase turnout.

In South Texas, Art Zuniga, an immigration service employee, has recorded a song, "Amnestia" to be played on Spanish-language radio stations. To allay aliens' longstanding fears about the immigration service, officials have filmed a Spanish-language television spot featuring the oldest amnesty applicant, 98-year-old Clara Escobedo de Martinez. She sits in a rocking chair, flanked by two friendly Border Patrol officers, touting the program.

Harold Ezell, the immigration service's Western regional commissioner who has often been at odds with Hispanic organizations in the past, now is photographed wearing a sombrero. He answers questions on a Spanish-language radio station as part of "Trio Amnestia," a group that includes his deputy and a Hispanic radio star called "El Tigre." The immigration service has printed 80,000 reminders about the program that are being inserted in packages of tortillas. Boy Scouts are being sent to poor communities to spread the word.

Similar efforts are being made to reach less accessible ethnic groups. In California, immigration officials have met with community elders and held small informational meetings in Chinese, Korean, Philippine, Samoan, Thai and Vietnamese communities. A few weeks ago, the immigration service had a float, with Chinese lettering hawking the amnesty program, in the Chinese New Year parade in Los Angeles.

### 'A Long Slow Process'

"Now the mountain has begun to come to Mohammed," said Gene B. Pyeatt, deputy director of the immigration service's Los Angeles district. "It's a long slow process, but we have to do it that way."

The problems of spreading the word are particularly difficult in the Northeast, where the large number of heterogeneous communities of aliens has caused the turnout to be disappointing. The Mexican-American barrios of the Southwest have had the strongest turnout, and the older cities of the Northeast among the weakest. Almost 60 percent of the applicants have come from the Western region that includes Southern California. Only 9 percent have come from the Eastern region that includes New York.

The Manhattan legalization office, for example, has been staging an array of days devoted to different ethnic groups. They have included Indian, Pakistani, Dominican, Haitian, Caribbean, and Chinese days in efforts to address the needs of individual groups.

Sometimes, different ethnic constituencies intersect. For instance, March 17 has been named Korean Day in Paterson, N.J., in an effort to spread the word to the Korean community.

"It's kind of incongruous," said Lou Galoppo, chief legalization officer at the immigration office in Newark. "But apparently no one told them it was St. Patrick's Day."