

REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE

Naturalization Services

Chapter 334, Laws of 2021 (ESSB 5092 Section 205 (4))

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Economic Services Administration
Community Services Division / Office of Refugee & Immigrant Assistance
PO Box 45857
Olympia, WA 98504-5857
(206) 568-5568
<https://www.dshs.wa.gov/esa/office-refugee-and-immigrant-assistance>

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Chapter 334, Laws of 2021 (ESSB 5092 Section 205 (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 state fiscal year (SFY) 2021 (July 1, 2020 – June 30, 2021).

Program Overview

The Office of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance (ORIA) is located within the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), Economic Services Administration, Community Services Division, and administers over \$30 million in federal and state dollars to support comprehensive services for refugees and immigrants living in Washington State. Through a network of community-based providers, ORIA delivers services that provide individuals and families with the resources they need to rebuild their lives from their arrival in Washington, to becoming naturalized U.S. citizens. More than 60 providers serve approximately 11,000¹ individuals annually.

These services are comprised of 14 different programs that fall into four core areas: Refugee Health and Wellness, Employment and Training Services, Immigration Assistance and Naturalization Services, and Whole Family Services. Included within these core areas are employment assistance, English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction, comprehensive case management, self-sufficiency education, refugee health screenings, health case management, behavioral health supports services, unaccompanied refugee minor foster care, youth educational activities, elders services, technology access and digital inclusion, and ORIA's naturalization program.

U.S. citizenship is a critical component of civic participation and integration into the community. The Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) authorizes U.S. citizenship to legal immigrants after they fulfill the requirements established by Congress in the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). To qualify for naturalization, an immigrant must be a legal permanent resident (LPR) for five years², 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 (**Appendix A**), 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

¹ ESA Program Briefing Book 2021 Annual Unduplicated Clients Served report for Refugee and Immigrant Assistance (RIA) naturalization and the Office of Refugee Resettlement Annual Service Plan report.

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

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 addition, ORIA collaborates and contracts with the City of Seattle to leverage state and local funds to expand the reach of 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 provides specialized and culturally appropriate services that help clients become U.S. citizens. These services include eligibility screening, application assistance, preparing fee waiver requests, assistance in obtaining medical disability exemptions 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.

With an increase in state funding beginning in SFY 2020, ORIA expanded services to help clients apply for Certificate of Citizenship for their children, increase language access and mitigate new barriers for low-income applicants, such as the cost of transportation to naturalization interviews when USCIS shifted appointments from their Seattle-based office to their Portland and Yakima field offices.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, all of ORIA's service providers responded to help clients with basic survival services and transitioned to providing remote services. ORIA expanded naturalization services to meet the critical needs of participants through ORIA's COVID-19 Response Services. These services included outreach and needs assessment, information and referral, connections to emergency and basic needs services, online education and client engagement.

Outreach Participants

The Naturalization Services Program prioritizes outreach to people who may be in jeopardy of losing federally funded public benefits if they fail to naturalize, or to connect with those people who could gain access to federal benefits if they became U.S. citizens. Federal law stipulates that people with refugee or humanitarian immigration status³ that experience a disability may receive federal Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits for a maximum of seven years. If, after seven years, they fail to naturalize they are in jeopardy of losing federal benefits, and may then become eligible to receive state-funded Aged, Blind, and Disabled (ABD) benefits. Other people who are lawful

³ A noncitizen may be eligible to receive SSI if they are a refugee, an asylee, a noncitizen with deportation or removal withheld, an Amerasian immigrant, or a Cuban or Haitian entrant.

permanent residents may only be eligible to receive federal SSI benefits if they become U.S. citizens. Therefore, providers give priority for service to the following targeted group of “outreach” participants:

- People with refugee or humanitarian immigration status that arrived in the U.S. on or after August 22, 1996, who are currently receiving federal Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefit and have not naturalized;
- People with refugee or humanitarian immigration status or lawful permanent residency (LPR) that are currently receiving state-funded Aged, Blind or Disabled (ABD) benefits; or
- People with refugee or humanitarian immigration status who are no longer eligible to receive SSI as a result of the seven-year time limit, which is removed once they become U.S. citizens.

Program Budget and Expenditures

In SFY 2021, the Washington State Legislature appropriated \$2,546,000 in general state funds (GF-S) for the Naturalization Services Program. During the reporting period, ORIA expended \$2,264,123 through its 13 contracted providers.

Program Outcomes

In SFY 2021, the Naturalization Services Program served 3,831 unduplicated clients, a decrease of 0.18% from the prior fiscal year. Out of those served, 571 (15%) were identified as outreach participants and providers reported that 1,270 clients became naturalized U.S. citizens.

Changes and Challenges

In SFY 2021, there were numerous challenges to naturalization caused by federal policy changes as well as the pandemic. Fortunately, the increased state funding supported an expansion of services to better support those seeking to naturalize during these particularly challenging times.

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to play a significant role in reducing the service providers’ ability to assist individuals seeking to naturalize. This resulted in numerous barriers that many clients faced, particularly low-income, limited English proficient individuals, in trying to access services remotely. The closure of USCIS offices to in-person services made it difficult for citizenship interviews to take place. As with most Washingtonians, naturalization service providers and program participants had to learn to navigate through the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic as programs shifted to

alternative modes of service provisions. In June 2020, USCIS reopened its offices but with limited capacity to continue to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

In SFY 2021, the USCIS Seattle District Office started to begin to send certain applicants from Seattle to Portland and Yakima, to reduce the application backlog and expedite the naturalization process. Those who had to travel for their interviews and oath ceremonies faced an additional economic burden, with the cost of travel and lodging, frequently on more than one trip. ORIA responded by allowing service providers to cover the transportation costs for their staff and the applicants required to travel to complete their naturalization process.

In the midst of the pandemic in May 2020, ORIA launched a new reporting and case management system for the Naturalization Services Program. After a three-year planning and development process, ESA's IT Solutions Division launched the Naturalization Services Program in the ORIA eJAS system. The timing of the launch was particularly challenging as the migration of data from the previous system, finalization and testing of the new system and the training of providers on system utilization all happened remotely. This required an immense shift in how the launch and ongoing provider support had been planned, which would have included hands-on training and on-site technical assistance. Service providers were not only dealing with the adjustment of working remotely, but now had to learn an entirely new reporting and case management system.

In SFY 2021, ORIA offered service providers an opportunity to attend the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC) Convening 2021, that brought together legal practitioners, advocates, and nonprofit leaders from all over the country to network, learn and gain insight about the current state of immigration law. The CLINIC Convening is the premier national conference providing comprehensive education on immigration law, program management, networking and advocacy.

NATURALIZATION SERVICES

BACKGROUND

Washington State has a large and dynamic immigrant community and is among the top refugee receiving states in the nation⁴. According to the 2019 American Community Survey, out of Washington's 2019 total estimated population of 7,614,893, approximately 16.8 percent (1,132,834) are foreign-born,++ and 47.1 percent (533,236) of those are Naturalized U.S. citizens⁵.

Each year, the Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) naturalizes approximately 800,000 citizens during ceremonies across

⁴ Refugee Processing Center: <http://www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/>

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, American Fact Finder: <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=0400000US53&d=ACS%201-Year%20Estimates%20Data%20Profiles&tid=ACSDP1Y2019.DP02&hidePreview=true>

the U.S. and around the world. In FFY 2020, 625,375 people became U.S. citizens, including 13,040 people in Washington State⁶

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 fully 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 and Medicare. See **Appendix B** for basic information on becoming a U.S. citizen.

Since its creation in April 1997, ORIA's Naturalization Services Program has provided specialized and culturally appropriate services to assist eligible immigrants to apply, prepare and naturalize in Washington State.

In SFY 2021, ORIA provided Naturalization Services through 13 contracts statewide with community-based organizations (CBOs), nonprofit legal services organizations that specialize in immigration, and refugee resettlement agencies, all of whom are recognized by the Office of Legal Access Programs (OLAP) in the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) (See **Appendix C**).

Participant Success Story

R. L. from El Salvador had never attended any kind of schooling in his life. As a result, it was a struggle for him at to prepare for the citizenship exam, but he worked hard. He attended International Rescue Committee's classes for six months and passed his citizenship test in 2021.

International Rescue Committee (IRC)

ORIA leverages existing community resources to maximize access to quality naturalization services. For example, ORIA contracts with the City of Seattle's Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs (OIRA) to leverage city funding for their New Citizens Program, which has 12 providers. Through this partnership, ORIA supports a broader collaborative approach to offering services in King County and offers an expanded menu of training and technical assistance for immigration staff and citizenship instructors.

All providers receiving ORIA funding are required to be DOJ recognized organizations with DOJ accredited individuals on staff and/or have access to a licensed immigration attorney. During SFY 2021, in an effort to build service capacity, ORIA continued to collaborate with the City of Seattle and OneAmerica to explore avenues to expand DOJ recognition and accreditation in Washington.

DSHS Naturalization Services providers have ties to ethnic communities and provide bilingual services in culturally appropriate ways to people seeking naturalization services. Many organizations hire and train bilingual staff who arrived in the U.S. as immigrants and refugees. Citizenship classes are held in convenient community locations such as community colleges, neighborhood community centers, religious

⁶ USCIS, Naturalization Data Set: <https://www.uscis.gov/tools/reports-and-studies/immigration-and-citizenship-data>

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 accessibility.

In SFY 2021, ORIA continued to contract with Northwest Immigrant Rights Project (NWIRP) to provide legal consultation and training to ORIA naturalization service providers and to assist eligible participants with complex naturalization cases to become U.S. citizens.

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, such as immigrants who obtained permanent residency through marriage to a U.S. citizen, who can apply after residing in the U.S. for three years. 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 Washington State residents; and
- Are 18 years old or older; and
- Are recipients of Supplemental Security Income (SSI), or other Washington State administered state/federal funded cash, food, and medical assistance, or were receiving such benefits at the time the participant began receiving Naturalization Services; and
- 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 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.

Outreach Participants

The DSHS Naturalization Services Program prioritizes reaching out to people who may be in jeopardy of losing federally funded public benefits if they fail to naturalize or to those people who could gain access to federal benefits if they became U.S. citizens.

People with refugee or other humanitarian immigration status are only eligible to receive SSI for up to seven years unless they naturalize. If they fail to become U.S. citizens, they are in jeopardy of losing their SSI cash benefits which is a monthly income of \$794 per eligible individual and \$1,191 per eligible couple. Once they lose SSI, they are eligible for the Washington State Aged Blind or Disabled (ABD) program, a monthly cash benefit which in SFY21 was \$197 for a single individual or \$248 for a married couple. Naturalization allows SSI recipients to keep or regain their benefits, which is a higher monthly income. It also avoids the need to draw on state funds for the alternative ABD benefits.

The DSHS Naturalization Services Program identifies people with refugee or other humanitarian immigration status who receive federal SSI or state-funded ABD benefits as a target group and designates them as “Outreach” participants.

Outreach participants are:

- People with refugee or humanitarian immigration status who arrived in the U.S. on or after August 22, 1996, who are currently receiving SSI, and have not naturalized;
- People with refugee or humanitarian immigration status or lawful permanent residence (LPR) that are currently receiving ABD; or
- People with refugee or humanitarian immigration status that are no longer receiving SSI as a result of the seven-year time limit.

Participant Success Story:

NWIRP assisted an elderly disabled client whose N-400 Naturalization application and N-648 Disability Exception Request were previously denied. NWIRP advised her about when she would be eligible to reapply without future issues. In addition, while before she had paid the naturalization fees, NWIRP was able to help her apply for a fee waiver. NWIRP represented her remotely via telephone in Portland and she became a US citizen on the same day as her interview. She is now eligible for full Medicare benefits.

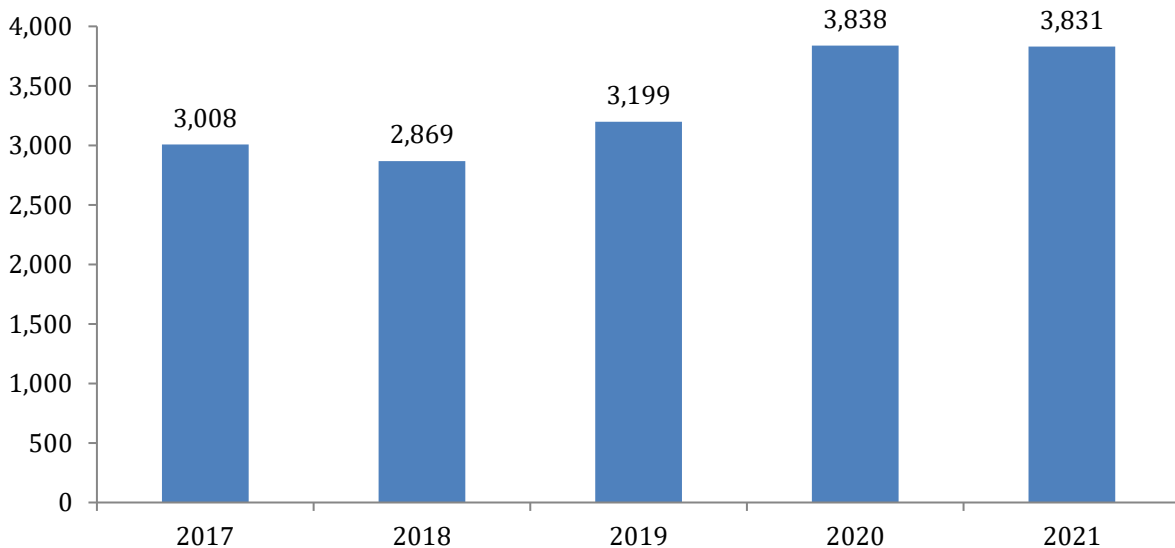
NW Immigrant Rights Project (NWIRP)

POPULATION SERVED

In SFY 2021, 3,831 participants received naturalization services, of which 2,263 (59%) arrived in the U.S. as refugees and 1,568 (41%) were non-refugee clients⁷. This reflects a 0.18% decrease in the number of people receiving naturalization services from SFY 2020.

The chart below shows the number of Naturalization Services Program participants from SFY 2017-2021:

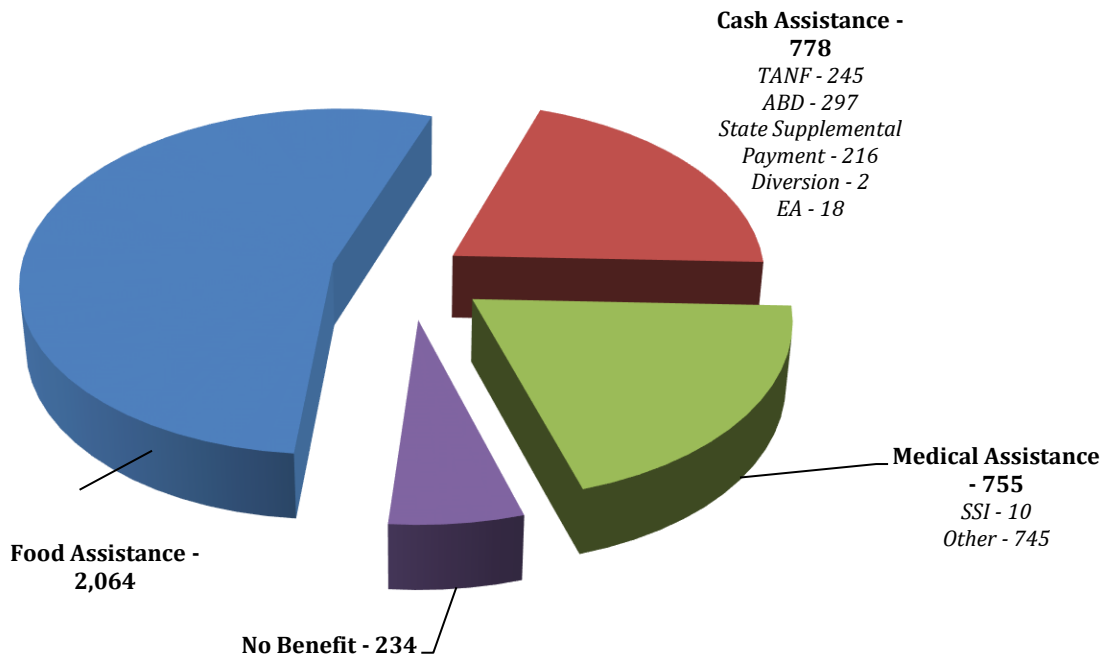
**Total Number of Participants in DSHS Naturalization Services Program
SFY 2017-2021**



The following chart shows the total number of unduplicated participants in SFY 2021 by their benefit type. If a client is in more than one public assistance program, DSHS uses the unduplicated client count based on program hierarchy: cash, food, and then medical.

⁷ Data Source: RIA, ACES Database Warehouse as of 10/28/2021.

Number of Unduplicated Participants by Benefit Type in SFY 2021⁸



Number of Refugees/Non-Refugees on ABD/SSI in SFY 2021⁹

In SFY 2021, 571 individuals met the criteria that prioritized them as Outreach participants. In addition, there were 89 legal permanent residents (LPRs) receiving SSI who were not considered 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 seven-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 2021, DSHS contracted with Naturalization Service providers to offer the services listed below.

⁸ Data Source: RIA, ACES Database Warehouse as of 10/28/21. 234 clients are indicated as receiving 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.

⁹ Data Source: RIA, ACES Database Warehouse as of 10/28/2021.

- Intake Screening – Establishing program and naturalization eligibility by interviewing and completing of the Intake Screening form as provided by ORIA for potential participants.
- Assistance with the N-400 Application – Assistance with completion and submittal of the USCIS Application for Naturalization (Form N-400). This form is lengthy and difficult for many participants to complete.
- Assistance with the I-912 Fee Waiver Request – Assistance with completion and submittal of the USCIS Fee Waiver Request (Form I-912) to waive the N-400 or N-600 fees.
- Citizenship Training and Instruction – Citizenship preparation training and instruction includes classes in American History and civics and USCIS interview questions. English language training needed for the citizenship test may also be provided.
- Disability Exception Request – 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 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 the interview to provide assistance and support.
- N-400 Fee Reimbursement – Reimbursement of the USCIS Form N-400 application-processing fee when participant is ineligible for a fee waiver.
- Fingerprint Fee Reimbursement – 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.
- Appeals – For Immigration Attorney/OLAP 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.
- Naturalization Completion Follow-Up – Providers track and monitor the progress of the client's N-400 application with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). They contact and follow-up with clients to confirm that they

have been interviewed and/or have participated in the oath ceremony. ORIA requires providers to report the successful naturalization of a participant to ensure the quality of the services being provided. Contractors must provide the date of naturalization and one of the following naturalization verifications: copy of USCIS oath ceremony notice or valid US Passport, or naturalization certificate number.

- N-600 Assistance – Assistance with completion and submittal of the USCIS Application for Certificate of Citizenship form (N-600 form) for a program participant’s child after naturalization completion through the ORIA Naturalization Services program.
- N-600 Fee Reimbursement – Reimbursement of the USCIS Form N-600 processing fee when participant is ineligible for a fee waiver.
- N-600 Completion Reporting – Reporting N-600 completion to ORIA when certificate of Citizenship is received for naturalized participant’s child from USCIS after N-600 Assistance is provided.
- Translation and Notary Services Cost Reimbursement for N-600 – Reimbursement of cost to procure translation and notary services for supporting documents when submitting N-600 to USCIS.
- Interpreter Services Cost Reimbursement for N-648 Medical Appointments – Reimbursement of cost to procure DSHS certified/qualified medical interpreter for N-648 medical appointments if a medical provider is not able to secure a qualifying interpreter for participant.
- Naturalization Workshop – Planning and conducting a one-day naturalization workshop in remote locations to provide naturalization services to participants.
- FOIA Request Fee Reimbursement – Reimbursement of the FOIA request fee when a contractor makes a request for a program participant to determine whether applying for naturalization would be appropriate.
- Assistance with the I-942 Reduced Fee Request – Assistance with completion and submittal of the USCIS Reduced Fee Request (Form I-942) to reduce the N-400 fee.
- Transportation Cost Reimbursement – Reimbursement for the miles traveled as a contractor and program participant for attending an interview and/or oath ceremony when they are scheduled outside of USCIS’s regular service facility.

ORIA continues to partner with the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project (NWIRP) to expand service provider capacity and to support legal services for individuals with complex immigration cases. These services include:

- Technical Assistance – Providing legal consultation to other DSHS Naturalization Services Providers to determine the best way to assist participants to become naturalized U.S. Citizens.
- Trainings – Developing and providing training and training materials specifically designed to help other DSHS Naturalization Services Providers develop an understanding of various naturalization topics and best ways to handle complex naturalization cases.
- Case Analysis – Conducting a comprehensive case analysis to determine whether the participant is eligible for representation for naturalization. A case analysis includes client interview, record request, legal research, criminal analysis, and follow up naturalization services with the participant if case is determined to be representable leading to successful naturalization.
- Naturalization Completion – Reporting completion of naturalization for represented case analysis participants in the program.

In SFY 2021, ORIA continued to provide expanded services to include COVID-19 Response services to support clients during the pandemic. These services included:

- Needs Assessment that addresses overall financial stability, housing, employment, social and emotional well-being, child and youth, and elders and health and medical needs.
- Information and Referral on resources for COVID-19, Unemployment Insurance benefits, public benefits and new stimulus programs and updates on available services and resources.
- Providing or Connecting with New Services, including addressing food insecurity, gaps in childcare, and employer outreach and engagement.
- Education and Client Engagement offering opportunities to address social isolation through remote options and engaging volunteers to support.

Test Exemptions and Accommodations

Contractor staff assist applicants in applying 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, so 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 for bringing 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. DSHS contractors have reported an increase in disability 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 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.

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 in waiving 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.

Naturalization Completion Reporting

The goal of the Naturalization Services Program is to assist people in becoming naturalized US citizens. Contractor staff assist clients throughout the naturalization process, from application completion and submission to responding to requests for additional information, to being present on-site at USCIS offices during a client's formal interview. Contracted service providers must monitor and track their caseloads on a regular basis to ensure that clients successfully naturalize. This requires regular follow-up and outreach to clients after the submission of the application over an extended period of time.

Contractors are reimbursed based on payment points for work from application submission to follow-up services including reporting of successful naturalization. By reporting the naturalization completions to ORIA, contractors are confirming that they have successfully assisted eligible refugees and immigrants in becoming U.S. Citizens. After naturalization, contractors may also assist clients with their voter registration and notification of naturalization to all necessary agencies such as the Social Security Administration.

In SFY 2021, USCIS reported that the processing time for the N-400 (citizenship) applications in the Seattle Field Office was approximately 18 to 23 months, which is twice the length of time as in prior years. For much of SFY 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic halted the ability for program participants to naturalize as USCIS limited the number of naturalization interviews as well as oath ceremonies. ORIA continues to work with providers to monitor and evaluate the impact of processing times and the pandemic on the Naturalization Services Program.

PROGRAM FUNDING

The DSHS Naturalization Services Program is supported solely through general state funds (GF-S). Since 2012, the Washington State Legislature appropriated \$1,657,000 for services. In recent years, providers reported an increase in the need for naturalization services, as many people in our communities are eager for the protections and opportunities afforded through naturalization. To address the need for services, providers leverage state dollars with other funding resources, such as grants from USCIS and private foundations to support comprehensive naturalization services. Regardless of the varied funding streams, providers often report waiting lists for services.

In 2019, the Washington State Legislature responded to the increasing need for services by allocating \$889,000 in additional funds for naturalization for SFY 2021. The total allocated to the program in SFY 2021 was \$2,546,000. This increase illustrates Washington State's commitment to the critical role naturalization plays in civic engagement and successful integration into life in the U.S. In anticipation of developing a program funding plan, ORIA met with naturalization service providers to identify how

best to invest the additional funds to better serve Washington residents interested in obtaining U.S. citizenship.

The enormous impacts of COVID-19 on naturalization services, through USCIS office closures and service cancelations, to the move to remote work, had an effect on the ability of ORIA providers to fully expend their contracted funding amounts.

In SFY 2021, the Naturalization program expended \$2,264,123.25. The following chart shows total program disbursement for SFY 2017-2021:

State Fiscal Year	Total Budget	Total Distribution
2017	\$1,657,000.00	\$1,646,184.00
2018	\$1,657,000.00	\$1,657,000.00
2019	\$1,657,000.00	\$1,651,175.00
2020	\$2,545,000.00	\$2,153,267.01
2021	\$2,546,000.00	\$2,264,123.25

PROGRAM DISBURSEMENTS

The Naturalization Services Program contracts follow a state fiscal year schedule (July 1 to June 30). In SFY 2021, Contractors entered into a performance-based contract structured on services provided and 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 the 80/20 contract model, Contractors receive up to 80% of their contracted amount by billing for specific service payment points and may earn the remaining 20% by achieving their individually negotiated naturalization completion annual performance outcome goals.

Contractors have a menu of services they are allowed to provide in order to offer flexibility on how they determine services and spend their contracted amount under the 80/20 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 in order 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.

This chart shows SFY 2021 program expenditures by service type:

Program Expenditures, SFY 2021

Service	Expenditures
N-400 Assistance	\$784,111.99
Fee Waiver Request	\$276,600.00
Reduced Fee Request	\$1,800.00
USCIS N-400 Application Fee Reimbursement	\$6,400.00
Reduced Application Fee Reimbursement	\$960.00
USCIS Fingerprint Fee Reimbursement	\$1,020.00
Disability Exception Assistance - USCIS N648 Form	\$103,151.45
Interpreter Services Reimbursement for N-648 Medical Appointments	\$75.00
FOIA Request Fee Reimbursement	\$0.00
Citizenship Training Hours	\$148,560.00
Citizenship Workshop	\$42,500.00
Appeals	\$900.00
Interview Preparation	\$82,900.00
Interview Assistance	\$61,000.00
Transportation Cost Reimbursement	\$6,099.81
N-600 Assistance	\$76,180.00
N-600 Application Fee Reimbursement	\$3,665.00
Translation & Notary Reimbursement for N-600 Support Docs	\$0.00
N-600 Completion Reporting	\$6,300.00
COVID-19 Response	\$136,500.00
Annual Performance Outcome Goal Achievement	\$443,500.00
Specialized Naturalization Services (Specialized Project)	\$63,760.00

Service	Expenditures
Annual Performance Outcome Goal Achievement (Specialized Project)	\$15,940.00
CLINIC Convening 2021 Conference for Providers	\$2,200.00
Total	\$2,264,123.25

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

In SFY 2021:

- 3,831 unduplicated clients received Naturalization services, of which 571 (15%) were Outreach participants.
- 1,270 Naturalization completions were reported for the total unduplicated caseload including N-600 completions.

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 2021, with a four-year look-back:

SFY 2017-2021 Outcomes

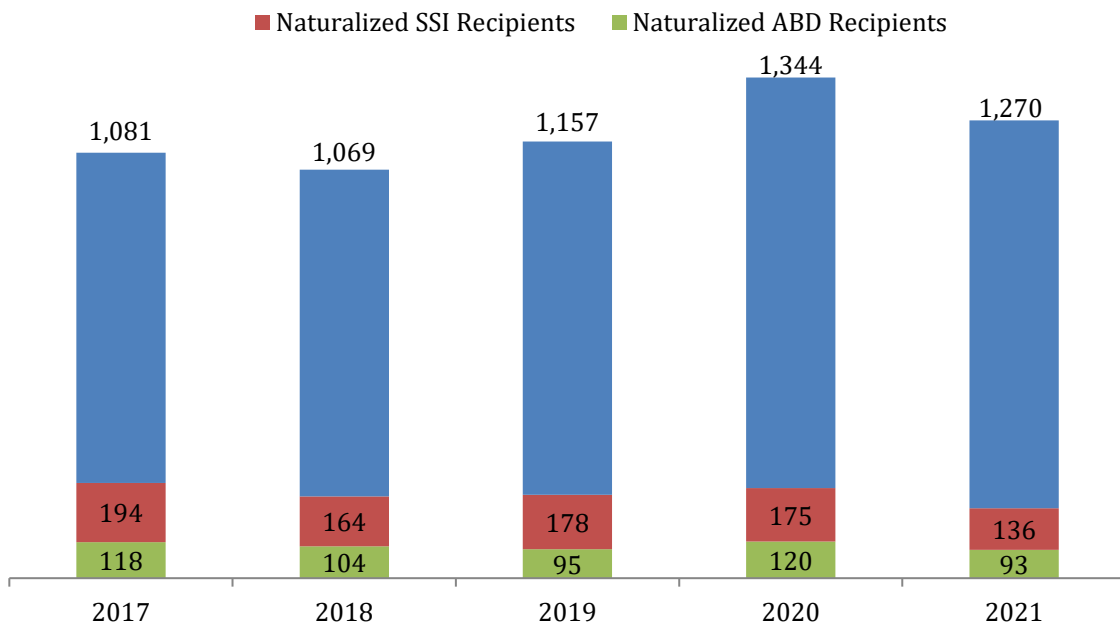
Service	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Application Assistance (2018, 2019 & part of 2020 included N-400 & fee waiver. In 2020, ORIA moved to separating the services)	n/a	1,658	1,706	509	n/a
N-400 Assistance	1,700	0	0	1,030	1,782
Fee Waiver Request	1,645	0	0	1,090	1,844
Reduced Fee Request	0	0	0	7	12
USCIS N-400 Application Fee Reimbursement	0	0	0	13	10

Service	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Reduced Application Fee Reimbursement	0	0	0	5	3
USCIS Fingerprint Fee Reimbursement	0	0	2	18	12
Disability Exception Assistance - USCIS N648 Form	233	305	309	285	347
Interpreter Services Reimbursement for N-648 Medical Appointments	0	0	0	3	1
FOIA Request Fee Reimbursement	0	0	0	0	0
Citizenship Training Hours	16,771 Hours	19,964 Hours	18,855 Hours	14,881 Hours	14,856 Hours
Citizenship Workshop	0	0	0	13	17
Appeals	1	5	2	6	3
Interview Preparation	426	448	801	795	829
Interview Assistance	197	191	361	300	305
Transportation Cost Reimbursement	0	0	0	175	24
Naturalization Completion Follow-up	1,082	1,069	1,157	1,344	1,207
N-600 Assistance	0	0	0	97	218
N-600 Application Fee Reimbursement	0	0	0	7	4
Translation & Notary Services Reimbursement for N-600 Support Docs	0	0	0	0	0
N-600 Completion Reporting	0	0	0	21	63
COVID-19 Response	0	0	0	1,152	910
Technical Assistance (Specialized Project)	n/a	94	123	31	42

Service	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Case Analysis (Specialized Project)	n/a	18 ¹⁰	33	20	23
Trainings to other DSHS Providers (Specialized Project)	n/a	2	2	2	3

The following chart shows the number of clients who have been granted U.S. citizenship status through the naturalization process from SFY 2017-2021, with breakout counts for SSI and ABD recipients who have naturalized:

Total Number of Naturalized Participants, SFY 2017-2021¹¹



The actual number of naturalized individuals is likely 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.

BARRIERS TO NATURALIZATION

The application process for naturalizing is complicated and a simple mistake can delay processing. It is also costly. The current naturalization fee is \$725 per person, which

¹⁰ Naturalization Completion was not a part of the Specialized Naturalization Services Program's performance outcome goal in SFY 2018 because the USCIS processing time has averaged approximately 16 – 18 months for naturalization applications with non-complex cases.

¹¹ Data Source: RIA, ACES Database Warehouse as of 10/28/2021.

includes the application fee and a mandatory fingerprint fee. Low-income applicants often 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.

While the high cost of application fees can be a barrier to individuals applying for citizenship, USCIS currently waives this fee for low-income applicants such as those on public assistance. Contractors are required to assist participants in submitting a fee waiver request and help them gather the documentation they need to support their request. In SFY 2021, Contractors reported helping participants submit 1,844 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.

To pass the citizenship test, applicants must have a detailed understanding of U.S. civics, history and political concepts. For example, the examination tests the applicant's understanding of how the federalist papers included the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. Service providers have incorporated rigorous curricula into their naturalization classes, which include instructional strategies for those with limited English skills.

ORIA service providers 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
- Limited English conversational skills, which are exacerbated under the pressure of the citizenship interview
- Citizenship classes tailored for "everyone" regardless of English capabilities
- Challenges in obtaining test exemptions or accommodations
- High costs related to the naturalization process: \$640 application fee and \$85 for the mandatory fingerprint fee

Another barrier in the naturalization process relates to Medical Disability Waivers (N-648). Over the last couple of years, DSHS contractors have been experiencing an increased level of disability waiver denials by USCIS. A disability waiver enables clients with disabilities, 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 USCIS the struggles that many providers face in obtaining an approval of the N-648 Disability Exception Requests for clients. The rejection of N-648s increases the time contractors need to spend to resubmit applications, and denials of N-648s may result in some 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 how medical experts complete disability waivers for a greater likelihood of approval.

The Department recognizes the service providers who contract with ORIA play a key role in identifying issues, strategies and solutions to help address systemic barriers to naturalization. ORIA hosted stakeholder meetings throughout the SFY 2021 program year to discuss outreach to clients, program successes and challenges and contracting structure. The intent is to work together to modify the program to improve the quality and effectiveness of the naturalization program.

APPENDIX A

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.

APPENDIX B

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 five 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 ten 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 18 - 23 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 seven-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.

APPENDIX C

SFY 2021 NATURALIZATION CONTRACTS

Contractor	Contract Amount
REGION 1	
La Casa Hogar	\$ 110,000
World Relief – Spokane	\$ 278,000
World Relief – Tri Cities	<u>\$ 135,000</u>
Region 1 Total	\$ 523,000
REGION 2	
City of Seattle	\$ 672,100
International Rescue Committee	\$ 148,000
Refugee & Immigrant Services NW	\$ 234,000
Refugee Federation Service Center	\$ 171,250
Ukrainian Community Center of WA	<u>\$ 81,000</u>
Region 2 Total	\$1,306,350
REGION 3	
Korean Women’s Association	\$ 198,000
Lutheran Community Services NW (Clark & King Counties)	\$ 200,000
Multicultural Self-Sufficiency Movement	\$ 80,800
Tacoma Community House	<u>\$ 60,000</u>
Region 3 Total	\$ 538,800
STATEWIDE	
NW Immigrant Rights Project (Specialized Project)	<u>\$ 79,700</u>
Statewide Total	\$ 79,700
Training Opportunities for Providers	
CLINIC Convening 2021	\$ 98,150
TOTAL CONTRACT AMOUNT	\$2,546,000