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Phx. advocates pushing citizenship to boost number of Latino voters

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PHOENIX — Advocates say they've helped more than 5,000 legal immigrants in the Phoenix metropolitan area apply for citizenship in hopes of boosting the number of Latino voters in November.

But many of those who applied may not get to vote because the immigration service reportedly isn't processing the requests fast enough because of backlogs created by a rush of new applications for citizenship.

An immigration official acknowledged a spike in naturalization applications has fueled backlogs, but the agency is trying to process applications faster by working overtime and hiring more employees. The labor coalition held 13 citizenship fairs over the past year in Maricopa County that helped more than 5,000 legal immigrants of voting age fill out the paperwork for applying for citizenship, doubling its goal, said Guillermo Nicacio, president of the grass-roots organization My Family Votes.

He said the fairs were part of a national push to get more Latinos to the polls in hopes of countering anti-immigrant measures and pressuring Congress to pass immigration reform after bills failed in 2006 and 2007.

Latinos make up 30 percent of Maricopa County's 3.7 million population, according to the Census Bureau.

But in the 2006 general election, Latinos accounted for only 8 percent of the votes cast.

Advocates believe they may have better success in boosting Latino voting power by focusing on immigrants, since they may be more motivated to vote.

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