

## **Suburban Immigrants Have New Ally**

By Natasha Korecki - The Daily Herald

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Lost documents. Long lines. Unanswered phone messages. Thousands of dollars in attorney fees. Wait periods that exceed months, even years.

As immigrants and their case workers listed off frustrations with applying for legal U.S. status in a Chicago meeting Saturday, they looked to a new leader to tackle those problems.

Prakash Khatri, new ombudsman with the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services - formerly the Immigration and Naturalization Service - is charged with cutting the red tape that plagues the immigration process.

That process has a great impact on the suburbs with 788,000 immigrants in the six-county area outside of Chicago in 2000, according to a Roosevelt University study.

More than 100 people from Korean, Chinese, Polish, Russian and various Latino groups packed the Erie Neighborhood House to talk about the future of the immigration agency.

Khatri vowed to work to obliterate backups, see that documents are kept in order and that applications are promptly processed. Although Khatri said some services have improved in the last two years, he likened the condition of some U.S. immigration offices to "fourth world countries."

"There is absolutely no reason for a person to wait two and a half or three years to become a permanent resident," Khatri said.

People like Dale Staton of Homewood are counting on Khatri.

Staton swallowed back tears of frustration as he described the difficulties he and his wife Tatyana still face after more than two years of trying to bring her son, Michael, 6, to the United States from Kazakhstan.

"She watched him grow up over the Internet," he said. "Tell me, how big of a threat to the United States of America is a 6-year-old boy?"

Congressional legislation calls for each state to get an ombudsman office to handle cases like Staton's. No money was set aside for the position in this year's budget, said Dale Asis, director of the Coalition of African, Asian, European and Latino Immigrants of Illinois. The coalition helped spur national legislation that created the immigration ombudsman.

U.S. Reps. Luis Guitierrez, a Chicago Democrat and Jan Schakowsky, an Evanston Democrat, told immigrants to take problems to congressional offices until the ombudsman positions are up and running.

"Our immigrant community is being mistreated," Guitierrez said. "We have to stand together to be sure they're respected."