

Program helps legal residents become citizens

By DANIEL DURBIN | Posted: Sunday, June 22, 2014 7:55 pm

GALVESTON — With the support of Galveston Independent School District and The Children's Center, a nonprofit organization called Ser and Hacer Galveston has helped hundreds of residents become U.S. citizens.

The program offers free classes preparing legal residents for the naturalization test.

During each semester, Alamo Elementary hosts the program's 12-week citizenship course, which teaches civics, government, U.S. history and English as a Second Language for beginners.

Additionally, the school district provides free space at its annex for the nonprofit's intermediate English classes and naturalization testing.

The Children's Center has allowed Ser and Hacer under its umbrella, donating office space and working on a grant for the organization.

Magdalena Alvarado, director of Ser and Hacer, offers folklore dancing nights for women in the program as well as arts and crafts at The Children's Center.

Mary Longoria, vice chair of The Children's Center, began working with the program to translate for Alvarado, whose native language is Spanish.

Longoria has since volunteered her time as co-director for the program alongside Alvarado.

"It's been a wonderful experience for me," Longoria said. "I was born in this country, so we take our citizenship for granted, and being part of this organization has definitely taught me what a value it is to be an American citizen."

Before applying for citizenship, students must be at least 18 years old and have been permanent residents for at least five years — three years if married to an American citizen.

Longoria said residents interested in naturalization testing should join the free program.

"They need to take the class first," she said. "As long as they work through our program, we help them fill out the application and help them submit it."

Residents must apply to become citizens by filing a Form N-400 with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

The nearest regional office is in Houston at 126 Northpoint Drive, but a downloadable application can be found online.

The test's application fee is \$595, with an \$85 biometric fee for fingerprinting, totaling \$680. The \$85 fee is waived for those older than 75.

Longoria said Ser and Hacer is the only remote site in the area for the naturalization test.

Traveling to Houston's testing area can be intimidating to some people, she said.

"Bringing the test here gives them a sense of security," Longoria said.

"GISD gives us the offices so we can have everybody there; the family can be a part of it and wait and support them, and we are there."

The latest naturalization test on June 5 included 15 students.

Saul and Gloria Alverdine were there to support their three grown children as they each took the test.

Rosa, Sandra and Daniel graduated from Ball High School but originally are from Mexico. They moved here six years ago for a better future, Rosa said.

Daniel praised the program, saying it did a great job supporting everyone in the class.

"It was very good experience," he said. "They are excellent teachers, and they wanted the best for us.

"One of the best parts about them is they do everything just to help, not to get anything back."

Alvarado said she wants to teach her students everything they need to know for the test; but, more importantly, she strives to create honest, hardworking Americans.

"Our mission is when the people become American citizens, they do their responsibilities," Alvarado said.

"They vote, are responsible and respect the laws. It is very important for us."

The program began in November 2011 and has since taught 344 residents with an 80 percent success rate, Longoria said.

At a glance

WHAT: Ser and Hacer Galveston

WHEN: Classes begin Sept. 8

WHERE: Alamo Elementary, 5200 Ave. N 1/2, in Galveston; and The Children's Center, 2902 Broadway, in Galveston

CALL: Mary Longoria, 409-682-5400; Magdalena Alvarado 409-692-7338

Online

www.uscis.gov/us-citizenship/citizenship-through-naturalization