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Fact Sheet

USCIS NATURALIZATION TEST REDESIGN

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is revising the naturalization test to create a test and testing process that is standardized, fair and meaningful. A standardized and fair naturalization test will include uniform testing protocols and procedures nationwide to ensure that there is no variation between offices. A meaningful test will encourage civic learning and patriotism among prospective citizens. A revised test, with an emphasis on the fundamental concepts of American democracy and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, will help to encourage citizenship applicants to learn and identify with the basic values that we all share as Americans.

BACKGROUND

During the past 10 years, the standardization and meaningfulness of the naturalization test have come under scrutiny. Various studies found that the exam had no standardized content, instruments, protocols or scoring system. Inconsistencies were reported in the way the exams were administered nationwide, and there was no assessment of whether applicants had a meaningful understanding of U.S. history and government.¹ To address these concerns, Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) launched a test redesign project in 2000 that has included technical assistance from several test development contractors, the National Academy of Sciences, a panel of history and U.S. government scholars, and a panel of English as a Second Language (ESL) experts. In addition, USCIS has sought input from a variety of stakeholders, including immigrant advocacy groups, citizenship instructors, ESL teachers, and USCIS District Adjudications Officers.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

Q. How will the naturalization test change?

A. *English Reading and Writing.* The reading and writing portion of the proposed new English test is similar to the existing test. Applicants will still have up to three chances to read and write a sentence correctly in English. The difference is that USCIS will provide applicants with study materials for the proposed test, to include a civics-based vocabulary list, and the list of sentences will focus on civics and history topics, rather than a list of sentences that cover a range of topics.

Civics. The proposed format for the new civics test will still consist of 100 civics questions and answers. USCIS will place these questions and answers, along with a study guide on the Internet and elsewhere in the public domain to help applicants prepare. Applicants must still answer six out of 10 questions correctly during the naturalization interview.

English Speaking Test. The English speaking portion of the test will still include the questions normally asked in the naturalization interview.

Q. What are the new civics questions and English vocabulary list items?

A. USCIS has posted on the web the vocabulary lists for the reading and writing portions of the pilot.

Q. How were the questions developed?

- A. *English Items.* A panel of English as a Second Language (ESL) and other test development experts chosen by the association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) developed the English items. The TESOL panel established an English language level for the test consistent with Department of Education reporting levels for adult basic education.
- Civics Items.* The TESOL panel also assisted in drafting and reviewing civics questions using a content framework identified by the Office of Citizenship from a review of government authorized civics and citizenship texts, the U.S. Department of Education's National Standards for Civics and Government, the current naturalization test, and the study guide developed by a panel of experts assembled by USCIS in 2004.

Q. How are the new questions an improvement over the old questions?

- A. *Fairness.* By weighing the questions on the new civics and U.S. history test we will ensure that all test forms are at the same cognitive and language level. By creating test forms at the same level of difficulty, we are ensuring that an applicant who goes for an interview in one city of the country has the same chance of passing the test as in any other city. The English vocabulary on the new test is also fairer because it is targeted at a language level consistent with the Department of Education reporting standards for the level required by Section 312 of the Immigration and Nationality Act. District Adjudication Officers are being trained to administer and score the naturalization tests in the same way nationwide to ensure uniform administration of the test.
- Meaningful.* Applicants will receive a study guide on the new civics and U.S. history questions so they can deepen their knowledge and understanding of our Nation as they prepare for the exam. The new items will focus less on redundant and trivial questions based on rote memorization and will focus on concepts, such as the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Some items on the current test fit those needs and required little content change, so several items from the current test will appear on the revised test. The range of acceptable answers to each question will also increase so that applicants can learn more about a topic and select from a wider range of acceptable answers. And finally, the reading and writing test will provide a tool for civic learning because the vocabulary list is civics-based.

Q. How will the interview process change for applicants?

- A. The interview process will not change.

PILOT PROGRAM

As part of the test redesign, USCIS will conduct a pilot program in ten cities beginning in February 2007 to ensure the agency has all the information necessary before the new test is fully implemented nationwide in 2008. During this pilot, USCIS will carefully analyze the new test questions to make certain that the questions are fair and work as they were intended. USCIS will also collect information about testing procedures, to include feedback from DAOs, to help refine the testing procedures and facilitate the smooth transition to the new naturalization exam.

Q. What will USCIS pilot?

- A. USCIS plans to pilot 142 U.S. history and government questions and approximately 35 reading and 35 writing items. The topic areas include principals of American democracy, system of government, rule of law, rights and responsibilities, American History, and geography. About half (57 questions) include rephrased versions of questions on the current exam. Pilot participants will receive advance copies of the history and government items for self-study. USCIS will also make public a list of the vocabulary words that comprise the reading and writing test, but not the actual test itself.

Q. How were the questions selected?

- A. The TESOL panel assisted USCIS in drafting and reviewing civics questions using best practices and conventional sample techniques, such as regression analysis, currently used in private industry.

Q. Where are the test sites?

- A. The pilot program will run in 10 cities that were randomly selected based on geographic region and citizenship application volume. The ten pilot sites are: Albany, NY, Boston, Mass., Charleston, S.C.; Denver; El Paso, Texas; Kansas City, Mo.; Miami; San Antonio, Texas; Tucson, Ariz.; and Yakima, Wash.

Q. How were the 10 pilot cities selected?

- A. To capture the diversity of USCIS offices and applicants, USCIS randomly selected a representative sample of 10 districts by geographic region and the volume of applications that were processed in each office to conduct the pilot. This method will help insure that the final results can be made with equal accuracy and statistical weight.

Q. What is the purpose of the pilot?

- A. A pilot is a crucial component of any test design process. A pilot ensures that the draft test items, scoring rubrics, and administration processes are appropriate, not too difficult, and elicit the responses we expect.

Q. How will USCIS conduct the pilot?

- A. USCIS must administer about 6,000 tests to achieve a representative and significant study.
- Pilots will begin in early 2007. USCIS trained the test administrators on the new exam process.
 - Once pilots begin, we anticipate that they will last approximately four months.
 - USCIS will mail a notification to all applicants scheduled for an interview at the pilot sites during the pilot period informing them that they have the opportunity to participate in the national pilot program.
 - Applicants will receive a letter explaining the pilot and study questions.
 - Applicants who take the pilot but fail one or more parts will have the opportunity to take the current test or part of the current test immediately during the interview, thus giving them an additional opportunity to pass the naturalization test.
 - Many of the questions on the pilot test and the current test cover the same subjects, so additional preparation is expected to be minimal.
 - Once pilot results have been analyzed, piloted items will be revised accordingly.

Q. Must applicants participate in the pilot?

- A. No. Applicants will have the choice to decline participation in the pilot test. For those who decline, they will be given the current test. USCIS will continue to meet with local immigrant service providers, advocates, and ESL teachers in pilot sites to gain their support so that they can encourage immigrants to participate in their government and make this a successful pilot.

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¹ (See reports and recommendations from Coopers and Lybrand, 1997; U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform, 1997; Department of Justice Office of Inspector General 2000; Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General 2005.)