

Learning Network helps residents become citizens

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The Learning Network of Clinton County's citizenship course celebrated two new graduates on August 27 at 1111 S. Jackson St. in Frankfort. Upon graduation from the Learning Network of Clinton County's course, Maribel Valdez and Carmen Reynoso are ready to pass their tests and become naturalized citizens of the United States of America. Valdez is originally from Mexico while Reynoso came here from the Dominican Republic.

"I love it," course instructor Keren Garza said. "It's new experiences with every student. Everyone has their challenges. Sometimes they come in with different stories. We have had students that are in the US Army, in Mexico or different countries, and how hard it was for them, and how exciting it is for them. So, I love it. I love every experience and every graduation. I think we share a little connection with each student. I love that (each class) is very small, so it is more personal. This is something that makes my heart happy."



The Learning Network began planning its citizenship course in the fall of 2020 and, a year later, they have six graduates.

“It is starting to pick up,” Garza said. “We talked to other counties that were doing it about what they thought was challenging and what they liked about the program. So, we thought we had enough information to start it up.

“We decided to start this program because there wasn’t any type of stuff like that in Clinton County,” Garza continued. “A lot of residents were not getting their citizenship because the process is difficult or they didn’t have the money to pay an attorney. So, we decided this would be a big help for the Hispanic community to get their citizenship. The Dominican Republic, El Salvador – we have Latinos from all countries wanting to get their citizenship. So, we decided to start the project.”

Garza said interest in the course has been growing.

“We started getting more to sign up for the classes, and we teach history,” she said. “It is different when you actually get the education and the history. I think they learn more and appreciate the country more – what they are getting into, what they are promising. They see the love they have for the country, and you see that they want to make this their home as well.”



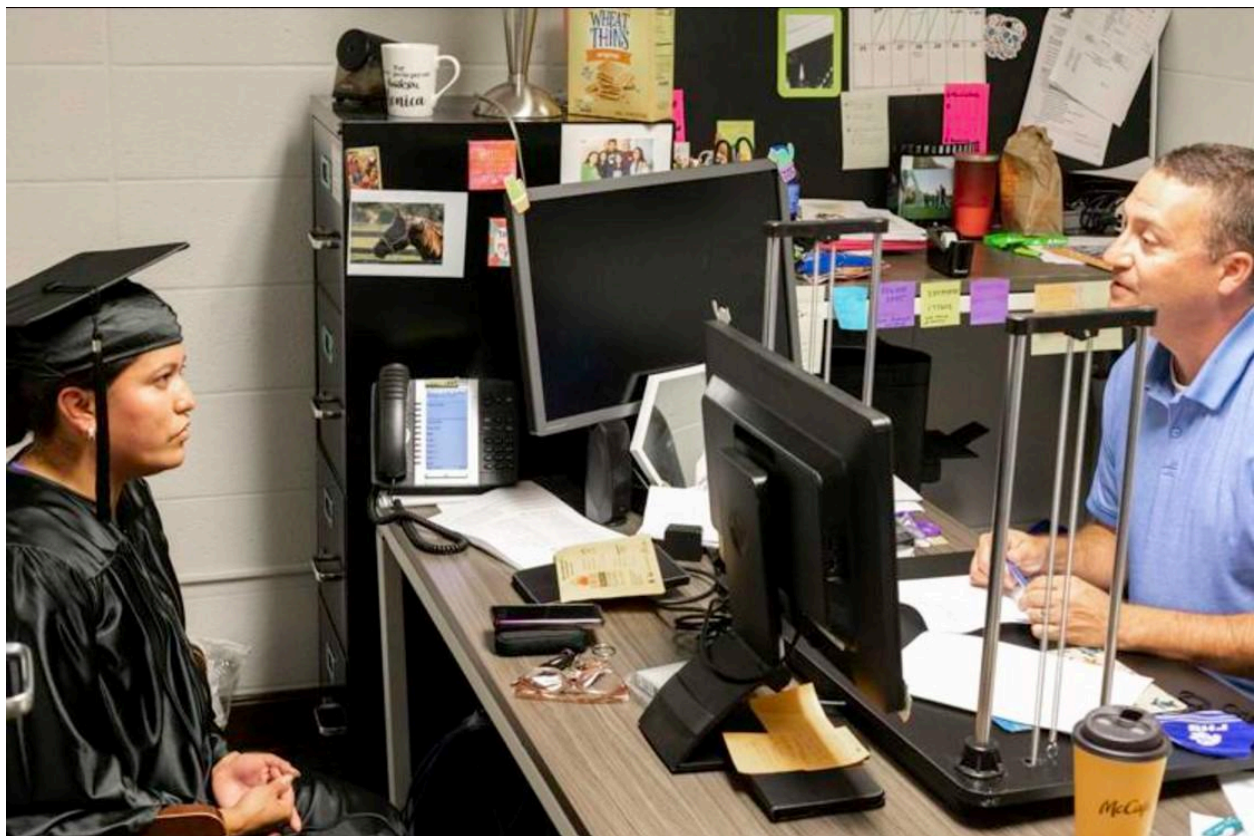
The Learning Network has made the naturalization process more affordable and accessible for lawful permanent residents.

“It does become very expensive, especially when they have to hire an attorney which can range up to a thousand dollars to be able to help fill out the application form, plus the \$725 that immigration charges for the application,” Garza said. “So, you are looking at two thousand dollars for it. We are alleviating that by helping them fill out the application to reduce those costs. We know with COVID and everything, it is hard. So we are happy to be able to help.”

Those who have been a lawful permanent resident for at least five years – or three if married to a U.S. citizen – qualify for naturalization and can sign up for the course by contacting the Learning Network of Clinton County at 659-6380.

“They can get ahold of the Learning Network,” Garza said. “They can call or drop by and tell us they are interested in taking the citizenship classes. We will take their name and number and schedule them in.

“We don’t like to put a time on it,” she added. “We go by the students. My beginners’ classes are more of a two-and-a-half-month class because we want to make sure that if they are paying, they pass the test. That is why the course is for two months – to make sure they are learning the history and the information.”



For a lawful permanent resident, some of the benefits of going through the naturalization process include being able to vote in federal elections, becoming eligible for federal jobs, becoming an elected official, easier travel and easier reentry into the United States.

“A lot of residents get Social Security or Medicare taken out of their paychecks, but a resident will never see anything from Social Security,” Garza said. “It is being withheld, but they will never see that money or Medicare. They have to become a US citizen to be able to get Social Security or Medicare.

“Hopefully, we get more people,” she added. “I know it is something that is hard. It is something that can be scary. When we don’t know about something, we tend to be scared. Once they see that it is easy, and they can do it, that fear goes away, and it becomes easier.”