

INS Backlog Deal Frees Lives on Hold

Immigration: Pact means people awaiting their documents can work and attend school.

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About 25,000 immigrants waiting for their residency applications to be processed by immigration officials can work and go to school in the United States under a preliminary settlement reached Monday in federal court in Santa Ana.

The agreement is expected to end a 2-year-old class-action lawsuit filed by relatives of immigrants granted legal immigrant status under a 1986 amnesty program.

The agreement would allow spouses and children of amnesty recipients to become U.S. residents, clarifying provisions of the federal Family Unity Program adopted in 1990 to prevent families from splitting up.

The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service had delayed the family unity application process in the late 1990s. As a result, many immigrants who applied for residency never received the federal documents they needed to find employment, and the delays prevented others from renewing their residency.

"Tens of thousands of people lost their jobs, their opportunity to attend public institutions of education, or their driver's licenses," said Andrew Knapp, a Los Angeles at-

torney for one of eight plaintiffs.

Under the proposed settlement, the INS would work 16 hours a day to process Family Unity Program applications and renewals when backlogs exist. The settlement also ensures that immigrants will get authorization to work and attend school while renewal applications are being processed.

"The settlement allows them to exercise rights given to them in a law in 1990," said Linton Joaquin, an attorney with the American Immigration Law Center in Los Angeles who filed the lawsuit.

INS officials said Monday that the backlog has been eliminated since the lawsuit was filed.

"We will carefully monitor the situation to make sure it doesn't happen again," said spokeswoman Lori Haley.

The INS will still be able to deport people while their applications are pending, but each action will be determined after a review.

The preliminary settlement will go before the plaintiffs and, if they approve the terms, final approval will be considered Oct. 28 by U.S. District Court Judge Alicemarie H. Stotler, Joaquin said.

Gustavo Escutia Steiner, 29, the principal plaintiff, said it took 18 months for his work authorization to be renewed, and during that period he could not get another job.

"If I lose this job, I am afraid that I will not be able to find another job because I cannot show that I am authorized to work in the United States," Escutia said in the legal action.