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Immigrants Seek Computer Help as New “Electronic” Diversity Visa Deadline Approaches

-- African Services Committee Sees Overwhelming Demand for Its Assistance --

(New York) Wednesday, December 17, 2003 – This Saturday, December 20th, Harlem-based African Services Committee will sponsor its third free Diversity Immigrant Visa Application clinic to assist scores of foreign-born applicants who have sought the organization’s help since the well-known immigration lottery went online exclusively for the first time this year.

The Diversity Visa program seeks to provide for a new class of immigrants by making available 50,000 permanent resident visas to people from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States, including more than 50 African nations and several Caribbean states. Applicants are chosen at random by a computer-generated drawing. According to the web site of the U.S. Department of State, which administers the Diversity Visa the electronic registration system was implemented to make the process more efficient and secure.

But for many hopeful applicants, who may reside in the United States or abroad, the new online system is another hurdle in an already complicated process. The new online Diversity Visa process skews results in favor of tech-savvy, PC-enabled people who might not have participated in the lottery previously, which required filling out paperwork and submitting applications by mail. Paper entries are no longer being accepted.

“Many applicants don’t have access to a computer and struggle with using the Internet, taking a digital photo, and putting attachments in the correct format,” said Getachew Frikremariam, Client Advocate and Accredited Immigration Representative [BCIS/BIA] at African Services Committee. Correctly formatting photographs for submission requires Adobe Photoshop or a similar costly and complex program.

Online instructions from the U.S. Department of State attempt to troubleshoot frequently asked technical questions, such as resubmitting an application bounced back by email, but are often confusing: “Since the entry was automatically rejected it was not actually considered submitted to the e-DV web site. Therefore it does not count as a submitted e-DV entry, since no confirmation notice of receipt was sent.”

At African Services’ public clinics, staff takes digital pictures and man computers filling entry forms one-by-one and getting electronic confirmation when applications have been submitted successfully. There was so much demand for their help that lines formed outside, and the organization scheduled an additional day of assistance before the application deadline on December 30th.

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“Like any lottery, there is expectation and excitement around the odds of a big payoff—in this case, a chance to become a permanent resident and finally an American citizen,” Mr. Frikremariam added. “This means a tremendous amount to our clients’ prospects for immigration and economic status, and social integration into American society.”

About African Services:

African Services Committee is a community-based organization in New York City dedicated to improving the health and self-sufficiency of the African community. Established in 1981 and based in Harlem, African Services provides direct health, housing, legal, and social services to over 7,000 African immigrants each year with an emphasis on HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment and support. African Services recently opened an office in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia where it provides HIV prevention outreach, testing and counseling services. For more information, go to: www.africanservices.org

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