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'Bethlehem Project' urges companies to help employees become citizens

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Immigrant workers who are eligible to become U.S. citizens have something to smile about: their employers may be willing to help them through the naturalization process.

Tuesday, the National Immigration Forum launched a nationwide initiative at Miami Dade College to encourage businesses to help their immigrant employees become citizens.

The effort has been dubbed "The Bethlehem Project" in honor of Bethlehem Steel, which in 1915 became one of the first U.S. employers to provide free English-language instructions to its foreign workforce.

The National Immigration Forum hopes that modern-day businesses emulate that legacy to help eligible immigrant employees become citizens.

"The Bethlehem Project is a unique opportunity for businesses to work with their immigrant workforce so that this dream of citizenship is something that can be achieved for all," said Ali Noorani, the Washington, D.C.-based group's executive director, who was on hand at the event at MDC's Wolfson campus in downtown Miami.

Eduardo Padron, president of Miami Dade College, called Miami a "a shining example" and "an exemplary symbol of what immigrants have been able to do", and urged businesses to help expedite the naturalization process.

"Becoming a citizen not only provides you with even greater responsibility for civic engagement involving all the things that are important for American citizens, but also helps you and helps the companies involved to really get a better return on investment," Padron said.

Attending Tuesday's event was Raquel Araujo-Escobar, an engineering supervisor at Intercontinental Miami from Brazil in the process of getting her U.S. citizenship. Becoming a citizen will not only help her have a voice in national decisions, she said, but also will help enable her to earn a higher salary.

"In an age where pay cuts are taking place, this is a free service that you can provide to your employees," said Leonie Timothee, the Human Resources and Talent Development Manager at the Intercontinental Miami. She is a Hatian immigrant who is now a citizen.

About 60 percent of Miami's population is composed of immigrants, noted former Miami Mayor Manny Diaz.

A 2012 report from the Department of Homeland Security's office of immigration statistics said at

least 8.5 million green card holders nationwide are eligible to seek citizenship.

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