

A Guide to Applying for a Green Card

By JENNIFER DILLEY, Emory University student

How do you become a legal resident of the United States? How can you live and work in the U.S. as if you were a citizen? These can be very daunting questions. Websites designed by the government to be helpful can be very dense, and they often make the process of becoming a legal resident more complicated and confusing. The following article contains helpful tips for obtaining a green card.

The Green Card

The first step in becoming a legal, long-term resident of the U.S. is to apply for a green card. The U.S. government formally calls this process applying for “lawful permanent residence”. A green card gives you official immigration status. It allows you to work in the U.S. legally, hold insurance, attend public school, own property, and reap retirement and health benefits as well. It can also act as the first step towards obtaining naturalization as a citizen of the United States. The main difference between having a green card and citizenship is that green card holders do not receive the right to vote.

The Application

Having a green card is crucial to beginning a successful new life here in America. But what is involved in the actual process of applying for lawful permanent residence?

To begin the process of obtaining a green card, you must apply through a legal organization called U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). This group has created a set of forms that you must fill out and return to the USCIS before your application is considered complete. When it is, you will be on your way to receiving a green card.

Here is a list of forms that you will need to complete and compile into a “green card application packet”. If you have access to a computer, you can download and print these forms for free directly from the USCIS website, which is www.uscis.gov/forms. Other websites offer immigration forms, but these sites are *not* affiliated with USCIS, and the forms they offer may not be the latest version of the form. Other websites will offer to sell you immigration forms. Do not use these forms—in some cases, using immigration forms from organizations other than USCIS will result in the delay or denial of your application for a green card.

When forms ask you to include documents such as your marriage certificate or proof that you have already been approved for an immigrant petition, never send in the actual document; make a copy of that document. If you do not have a copier at home, your local library will have one, and your librarian will be happy to help you make copies. If you do not have access to a computer or the Internet, you may call USCIS at 1-800-870-3676 and request these forms by mail, which they will gladly send to you. Some of the USCIS forms require a filing fee, though some applicants may receive a fee waiver. Information about eligibility for this fee waiver is also available online at www.uscis.gov.

Forms and Fees

- **Form I-485**—This form is also called the Application to Register Permanent Residence or Adjust Status. This form comes with “Supplement A” which further explains filing and other fees associated with applying for a green card. Without a waiver, the total filing fee for this form is \$1,010.
- **Form G-325A**—Known as the Biographic Information Form, you only need to complete this form if you are between the ages of 14-79. There is no filing fee for this form.
- **Form I-693**—This is the Medical Examination form. Unless you have lived in the United States continuously since 1972 or if you have already had a medical exam based on a fiancé visa, you must have a physical examination, conducted by a civil surgeon whom USCIS has designated. The results of this examination are generally only acceptable for 12 months after the physical, so schedule your exam as close as possible to the time that you apply for a green card. Here is a link to a “civil surgeon locator” which is provided by the USCIS website.
https://egov.uscis.gov/crisgwi/go?action=offices.type&OfficeLocator.office_type=CIV
There is no filing fee for **Form I-693**.
- **Form I-864**—This is called the Affidavit for Support. It is to be completed by your sponsor. Applicants who are applying for lawful permanent residence through an employment petition may not need this form. There is no filing fee for this form.
- **Form I-765**—This is the Application for Employment Authorization, which will allow you to hold a job in America. The filing fee for this form is \$340. However, there are special cases who are exempt from the fee.
- **Form I-94**—Called the Arrival Departure Record, this form acts as the required evidence of inspection, admission, or parole into the U.S. which you need to complete your application packet. This form is not available on the USCIS website.
- You will also need to include two recent color photos of yourself in your application packet.

Special Cases

In addition to these forms, if you have already been approved for an immigrant petition, you must submit a copy of the approval notice that the USCIS sent you along with your application packet.

- If you are an asylee or a refugee, you must submit a copy of the letter or **Form I-94** (Arrival Departure Record) that shows the date you were given asylum or refuge in the U.S. You must also include **Form I-643**, a Health and Services Statistical Data form. This form is available online at www.uscis.gov/forms, and there is no filing fee for **Form I-643**.
- If your spouse became a legal permanent resident (they received a green card) after you were married, you must submit evidence that your spouse has been granted permanent residence. You should include with your application packet a copy of your marriage certificate as well as proof that

any previous marriages have been legally terminated, as having multiple current spouses is illegal in the U.S. and will hamper your ability to receive a green card.

Please refer to the USCIS website for a more detailed list of special cases.
(www.uscis.gov)

Getting Help

Applying for a green card can be frustrating due to the sheer amount of paperwork the process requires. Some immigrants choose to let an attorney or another accredited representative help them with the complicated process of applying for a green card. However, this can also be tricky, as fraudulent individuals sometimes pose as legal representatives and then cheat newcomers to America, taking their money and leaving them in the lurch. If you decide to turn to an attorney for legal assistance, always check for the attorney's validity by asking to see that attorney's current attorney licensing document. This document will contain an admission number. Make note of this number and contact the State Bar admission authorities to verify that number and therefore the validity of the attorney.

If you choose to use the services of an accredited representative rather than an attorney, ask to see a copy of the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) decision granting official recognition to that accredited representative. Seeing these documents are your rights. To protect yourself, never sign blank applications, petitions, other documents, or papers that you may not understand. Never sign a document that contains a statement you know to be false. Obtain copies of all documents prepared for or submitted by you to UCSIS. If you cannot afford legal representation, inquire in your community about the availability of reduced or no-cost legal services for immigrants.

If you encounter any problems at all as you apply for a green card, feel free to contact UCSIS at 1-800-870-3676 or 1-800-375-5283. The employees there are trained to handle any difficulty and answer any question you might have.

Contact Information

National Customer Service Center: 1-800-375-5283

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services: 1-800-870-3676

USCIS Email Address (for comments about the website only): uscis.webmaster@dhs.gov

USCIS website: www.uscis.gov

Please refer to the website for information about where to mail your application. Depending on the state you live in, the address of the USCIS Service Center will change. Here is the link that will take you to the page that describes where you should mail your application.

<http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis/menuitem.5af9bb95919f35e66f614176543f6d1a/?vgnextoid=89c3b62aedcee010VgnVCM1000000ecd190aRCRD&vgnnextchannel=7220c9ee2f82b010VgnVCM10000045f3d6a1RCRD>