

Politics

# Obama administration is starting in L.A. to help immigrants become citizens



Mayor Eric Garcetti, shown at City Hall last year, met with Obama administration officials met local nonprofits and business owners to discuss ways to encourage immigrants to become U.S. citizens. (Rick Loomis / Los Angeles Times)



By **Sarah D. Wire** · Contact Reporter

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**O**bama administration officials met in Los Angeles on Friday with Mayor Eric Garcetti, local nonprofits and business owners to discuss ways to encourage immigrants to become U.S. citizens.

“To launch forward we must return to our core values as Americans and even in these tough times strive to embrace our role as a nation of immigrants, a nation of dreamers, a nation of hope,” Garcetti said on Twitter about the meeting, which was closed to the public.

The 4 1/2-hour meeting in City Hall was part of a multi-city tour by the [White House’s Task Force on New Americans](#), which the administration previewed in a call with reporters Thursday.

Julie Chavez Rodriguez, senior deputy director in the White House Office of Public Engagement, said

Friday's meeting will allow federal officials and members of Garcetti's staff to coordinate with local leaders in business, nonprofit and community organizations. It also focused on how the federal government can make it easier for new citizens to integrate into life as Americans, according to the White House.

"Starting in California is a perfect kickoff from our perspective," she said.

In recent years, California has [moved repeatedly to provide rights, benefits and protections to immigrants in the country illegally](#), including in-state tuition, driver's licenses, rules to limit deportations and state-funded healthcare for children.

Los Angeles, San Francisco and San Jose have signed on to participate in the task force, as have cities in 25 other states.

Chavez Rodriguez praised several California efforts, including the partnership between U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and the Los Angeles Public Library system to [create "citizenship corners" at every branch](#) and hold citizenship classes. She lauded the increased funding for citizenship and naturalization services by the Napa Valley Community Foundation, and the targeting in San Francisco of individuals eligible for naturalization and connecting them with resources.

Garcetti said Step Forward LA, a program created in 2015 that helps people determine whether they are eligible to become citizens and prepares them for the citizenship test, has helped 45,000 people.

He said there are an estimated 350,000 legal permanent residents in Los Angeles alone who are eligible to apply for citizenship but haven't. In the greater area, the number soars to 750,000.

"This isn't an abstraction for us. It isn't an abstraction for me," Garcetti said.

Joining the White House's effort is former Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher Fernando Valenzuela, [who became a U.S. citizen in July](#). He said he wants people to know there are resources available to assist people starting the process and to help integrate new citizens.

"I am excited to vote in my first presidential election," he said.

According to Garcetti's office, the more than 40 attendees of the closed-door meeting were scheduled to include Special Assistant to the President for Immigration Policy Felicia Escobar, Chief of the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs Linda Lopez, and USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration Director Manuel Pastor.

It was split into two panels, said Garcetti spokesman Connie Llanos. The first was on ways to reach and engage potential new citizens, the second was on how they can be integrated into American culture by learning English, finding jobs and registering to vote.

"A huge barrier to folks trying to become citizens is not having access to the right resources and being

daunted by the process,” Llanos said, adding that White House officials mostly wanted to hear about what is working and not working locally.

“There’s a lot of listening that happened from the White House’s perspective, they want to know what these cities are doing,” she said. “Our Step Forward citizenship campaign is a real model.”

Speakers included members of the National Assn. of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, Refugee Forum of Los Angeles, California Endowment, Univision, Asian Americans Advancing Justice of Los Angeles, and the Youth Policy Institute.

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## **UPDATE**

**3:30 p.m.** — This story was updated with additional details and context.

This story was originally published at 3 a.m.