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Virginia lawyer presides over thriving immigration forum

By *Martin Desmarais*

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ARLINGTON, Va. — A decade ago, when the Internet was a little known computer entity, attorney Rajiv Khanna launched a Web site about immigration law hoping to promote his business and his field. Today his sites create a forum for information, discussion and advocacy that is rivaled by very few, if any.

Still, Khanna does not push his sites — immigration.com or immigrationportal.com — in an effort to increase the traffic.

"We don't need hits, people who need to find us will find us," said Khanna, who has practiced immigration and business law in the Washington, D.C., area for 14 years.

And they do.

According to Khanna, 67,000 people are registered members of immigration.com. Immigrationportal.com's public forum (which is linked to immigration.com) averages about 400 to 500 people online at any given time. On a recent afternoon, for example, about 560 active users were using the forums. The site's record for most users at once was just under 1,000 this past July. Discussion topics range from U.S. immigration, to starting and doing business in the United States to changes in the United States after the terrorist attacks.

Alexa Internet Inc., which is owned by Amazon.com Inc. and ranks Web sites by weekly visitors, regularly lists immigration.com as a top immigration site in the world.

And now immigration.com is making its presence felt on Capitol Hill with a number of petitions related to immigration issues.

The most recent petition concerns speeding up the "excruciatingly slow" processing of the final stages of Green Card applications. Specifically, the petition seeks to increase the priority and resources given to process employment-based I-485 applications.

Among the petition's suggestions are: automating the name check and security check procedures, speeding up the time it takes to validate fingerprints (currently 15 months) and eliminating the annual renewal of employment authorization.

The petition also asks the Department of Homeland Security to appoint some officials to exclusively work on old cases, especially those filed prior to the current processing month.

"This would help alleviate disparity in the process periods. People who have applied in 2002 have been accorded their I-485 approvals, whereas persons who applied in 2000 or 2001 are still awaiting for (the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services) response," the petition states.

Until 2002 the Immigration and Naturalization Service used to take less than a year to decide on employment based I-485 applications, but with the introduction of additional security checks, the processing time has now increased to more than 19 months and in some cases more than two years, according to information from Khanna. Rough estimates suggest approximately half a million applications are pending.

"What is alarming is, the processing time delays are worsening each month," the petition states.

"This severe processing delay is affecting our lives enormously," the petition states on behalf of those

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who have signed. "We cannot be sure of our future. We cannot make vital decisions in our lives including marriage, home ownership, children's educations — to name just a few. Our career advancement is hampered because the applicant has to remain with the same employer or similar job in order to benefit from this adjustment of status."

The petition will be submitted to Prakash Khatri, the ombudsman for citizenship and immigration at the Department of Homeland Security.

In its first week online the petition collected about 2,000 names.

Khanna said that, in the past, petitions from his Web site have been sent along to members of different legislative offices with over 12,000 signatures apiece.

And these petitions have prompted responses.

For example, Khanna said Dale Ziegler, chief of the U.S. Labor Department's Division of Foreign Labor Certifications, called him to discuss issues related to a petition.

Since the Web sites are run from his office, Khanna is more than willing to act as a spokesman for the petitions.

However, his intent when starting up the sites was only to provide a forum for immigration-related discussion and information. The idea to start petitions was suggested by forum users.

"We are just the host and intervene when needed," he said. "For us it just melds very well with what we do (as immigration attorneys.)"

Despite having a presence for years, Khanna looks at the forum created by his Web sites as only having just scratched the surface of its potential.

"We are really just starting out. Hopefully we will be able to do a lot more," he said.

Khanna already has plans to launch another site that will focus more on advocacy for immigration issues.

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