

## **VI. OMBUDSMAN OUTREACH**

During the Ombudsman's tenure and throughout the reporting period, the Ombudsman has strived to be open and accessible to customers and the general public. To that end, the Ombudsman has traveled to over 40 USCIS facilities, met with countless stakeholder organizations, and held numerous in-person and telephonic meetings with interested parties. The Ombudsman has urged USCIS to be a more transparent agency with better communication with its customers and, in this regard, the Ombudsman has sought to lead by example.

During the reporting period, the Ombudsman started new outreach initiatives and continued other programs to ensure that individuals and employers have access to the Ombudsman's services and to make certain that problems with USCIS are recognized and addressed.

### **A. Trips**

During the reporting period, the Ombudsman visited over 40 USCIS facilities, including field offices, service centers, and other facilities. Since the office's inception in 2003, Ombudsman Prakash Khatri personally has visited over 150 USCIS facilities and the Ombudsman's staff has visited at least 14, as listed in Appendix 3. The purpose of these visits was to see first-hand the issues that individuals and employers encounter, identify systemic problems, and consult with USCIS field offices on proposed solutions. The travel and site visits provided the Ombudsman opportunities for candid dialogue on a variety of issues including: the impact of immigration processing backlogs on families and employers; the lack of standardization in immigration adjudications; and ongoing problems communicating with USCIS via the NCSC.

### **B. Teleconferences**

During the reporting period, the Ombudsman began a pilot program series of teleconference calls entitled, "How Is It Working for You?" These teleconferences are an opportunity for USCIS customers and stakeholders to ask questions, express concerns, or identify best practices on specific topics or regarding particular USCIS offices.

**Figure 17: “How Is It Working for You” Teleconferences**

<b>Discussion Topics</b>	<b>Date</b>
Bi-specialization	December 15, 2006
National Customer Service Center	February 28, 2007
Temporary Worker Visas	March 27, 2007
Requests for Evidence	April 24, 2007
Affidavits of Support	April 24, 2007
I-90 Process	April 24, 2007
<b>Field Offices</b>	
Miami, FL	January 23, 2007
New York, NY	January 23, 2007
Philadelphia, PA	February 16, 2007
Newark, NJ	February 16, 2007
Washington, D.C.	March 27, 2007

The topics, dates, and times are posted in advance on the Ombudsman website, along with how to participate. As part of the pilot, the Ombudsman has invited USCIS representatives from the relevant offices to listen to the call to gain additional understanding of and address customers and stakeholders’ issues. The Ombudsman also recently began posting on the website questions and comments raised during the teleconference and USCIS’ responses. The Ombudsman encourages suggestions for future teleconferences, which can be emailed to [cisombudsman.publicaffairs@dhs.gov](mailto:cisombudsman.publicaffairs@dhs.gov). During the next reporting period, the Ombudsman plans to end the pilot and launch the “How Is It Working for You” program as a regular part of its outreach efforts.

### **C. Website**

The Ombudsman’s 2006 Annual Report (at p. 5) included information on the number of visits to the website, [www.dhs.gov/cisombudsman](http://www.dhs.gov/cisombudsman). Unfortunately, the Ombudsman cannot provide that information for this reporting period, due to updates and improvements to the DHS website. However, these numbers are currently tracked and will be available for next year’s report.

During the reporting period, the Ombudsman expanded the website to make available additional resources to individuals and employers.

The website includes the following:

- All recommendations submitted to USCIS, along with responses from the agency.
- Ombudsman priorities for the reporting period, as described further in section VI.F.

- Information on upcoming Ombudsman teleconferences, as well as questions and answers from those sessions.

DHS' recently reformatted immigration webpage also highlights links to the Ombudsman's website.

#### **D. Trends Email**

The Ombudsman maintains an email account, [cisombudsman.trends@dhs.gov](mailto:cisombudsman.trends@dhs.gov), specifically for customers and stakeholders who have concerns about trends and systemic issues and may have suggestions for solutions. During the reporting period, the majority of correspondence forwarded to the Ombudsman's trends email pertained to adjudication delays due to FBI name checks.

#### **E. Virtual Ombudsman's Office**

The issue of creating local ombudsman offices will be reviewed further, but there are no new budget requests to establish such local offices for FY 08. Alternatively, the Ombudsman is working with the relevant DHS components to develop a Virtual Ombudsman's Office. The Ombudsman expects this program to be fully operational and make all services of the Ombudsman more easily available to individuals and employers across the country via the internet by FY 08, or earlier.

The Virtual Ombudsman's Office will include the following:

- **Online Case Problem Submission** – The Virtual Ombudsman's Office will have a fillable case problem form to allow individuals and employers to enter and submit necessary case problem information online. Until the Virtual Office is fully operational, the Ombudsman is planning to post the fillable case problem form on the website as a pilot program to evaluate its usage. Individuals and employers will be able to complete the form online, print out a copy, and mail it to the Ombudsman.
- **Population of Data Fields** – When case problems can be submitted online, the information supplied will automatically populate data fields in the Ombudsman's database for review and analysis. This process will avoid time-consuming and costly data entry.
- **Improved Analysis and Reporting Capabilities** – The Virtual Office will allow the Ombudsman to more easily analyze and report on case problem data. The current system relies on an outside contractor for developing certain reports, which is time-consuming and often means desired reports are not generated.
- **Interface to Share Concerns and Solutions** – The Virtual Office also is to include an interface for stakeholders and customers to relay concerns and share possible solutions, thereby enabling the Ombudsman to identify areas for further analysis and recommendations to USCIS.

The Virtual Office offers an efficient method of providing government services, will minimize infrastructure and personnel costs, and uses advancements in information technology.

## **F. Ombudsman's Priorities**

During the reporting period, the Ombudsman posted priorities on the office's website at [http://www.dhs.gov/xabout/structure/editorial\\_0482.shtm](http://www.dhs.gov/xabout/structure/editorial_0482.shtm). The Ombudsman will be regularly posting information on the progress made on these issues, as well as updating the priorities list. The priorities for this reporting period were:

### **1. Recommending Solutions to Systemic Issues that Continue to Cause Individual Case Problems**

The Ombudsman assists individuals and employers who experience problems with USCIS by:

- Identifying individual case matters and the systemic problems revealed by case inquiries as well as making recommendations to prevent the same problem from recurring.
- Making available to the public an online form to expedite the processing of case problems submitted to the Ombudsman.
- Leveraging information technology resources to design a Virtual Ombudsman's Office that will provide similar services for a fraction of the cost of establishing local ombudsman offices.

### **2. Expanding Up-Front Processing Programs**

The Ombudsman is actively working with USCIS on the expansion and national roll-out of up-front processing programs. These programs employ new and innovative processing models to improve customer service and increase efficiency, thereby enhancing national security.<sup>92</sup>

### **3. Addressing USCIS Fundamental Budget Issues**

Under current funding structures, USCIS is unable to maximize efficiency and provide true world-class customer service. As long as certain program costs are unfunded and the agency is expected to recover its costs almost entirely from fees, USCIS will continue to struggle to resolve the conflicting goals of improving efficiency and customer service, while ensuring revenue streams to provide for its unfunded mandates. The Ombudsman is working with DHS and USCIS leadership to identify new funding strategies to address this dilemma.<sup>93</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> See section IV.

<sup>93</sup> See section III.H.

#### 4. Reviewing Processing Delays Caused by USCIS Security Screening

FBI name checks significantly delay adjudication of immigration benefits for many customers and may not achieve their intended national security objectives. The Ombudsman fully supports robust and thorough screening of foreign nationals. At the same time, the Ombudsman is seeking a review of the current FBI name check process to ensure that it meets U.S. national security goals while not unduly delaying adjudications for legitimate applicants.<sup>94</sup>

#### 5. Improving USCIS Customer Service and Communications

USCIS service and communications with its customers are key concerns of the Ombudsman. Recently, the Ombudsman has seen some improvement in USCIS customer service and communications with customers, though these issues continue to be challenges for USCIS.<sup>95</sup>

## VII. CASE PROBLEMS

By statute, the Ombudsman receives and processes case problems to assist individuals and employers who experience problems with USCIS.<sup>96</sup> The case problem resolution unit helps identify systemic issues that, once corrected, will prevent the reoccurrence of future such case problems.

### A. Case Problem Processing

#### 1. How to Submit A Case Problem

The Ombudsman's website, [www.dhs.gov/cisombudsman](http://www.dhs.gov/cisombudsman), provides detailed information on how to submit a case problem:

First, please write a letter or use DHS Form 7001, which was accessible on the Ombudsman's website as of June 6, 2007. If writing a letter, please provide the following information in the order below to assist in identifying your case.

- For the person with the case problem, please provide the person's: (1) full name; (2) address; (3) date of birth; (4) country of birth; (5) application/petition receipt number; and (6) "A" number;
- The USCIS office at which the application/petition was filed;
- The filing date of the application/petition; and
- A description of the problem.

<sup>94</sup> See section III.F.

<sup>95</sup> See sections III.D and K.

<sup>96</sup> See 6 U.S.C. § 272(b)(1).