Message from the Ombudsman

For almost 4 years I have had the immense honor of serving as the Citizenship and Immigration Services Ombudsman. As I look back on my service, I am mindful of our mission and proud of how hard we work to advance it. I have been privileged to visit a sizeable part of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' (USCIS) operations, meeting hundreds of USCIS officers and staff and seeing firsthand their proven commitment to public service and to immigrant communities around the country and abroad. During this time, I have also hosted with the Ombudsman staff over 500 stakeholder engagements to gain a deeper understanding of the issues that USCIS' customers face today.

Our immigration system has evolved in impressive ways, with USCIS rising to meet national security and fraud detection challenges, engaging effectively through local field offices, and, most recently, working to address the unprecedented credible fear and affirmative asylum backlogs. At the same time, the agency has allocated vast resources to refugee processing in the Middle East and to the critical national security activities involved in that effort. USCIS also created the Central American Minors program to offer much-needed safe passage to the United States to children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Over the past 5 years, USCIS has also planned for and delivered on essential executive action solutions in the absence of comprehensive immigration reform.* Throughout that time, the agency has been responsive to Congressional oversight, with hearings focused lately on refugee processing, executive actions, the use of social media, and alleged fraud among prospective immigrant investors.

USCIS, however, still has much work to do to resolve longstanding systemic issues that compromise efficiency, quality of adjudications, and customer service. As a former Immigration and Naturalization Service counsel, seasoned immigration practitioner, and now as the Ombudsman, I have seen the detrimental impacts of inadequate customer service, delays in processing times, inconsistent adjudications, and ineffective policymaking. These are meaningful problems and should be treated as such.

With a myriad of competing priorities, the agency has made insufficient progress to address processing times delays (critically on the rise in the past 2 years); inconsistencies in adjudications across service centers; substantial failure to meet the 90-day regulatory adjudication deadline for employment authorization documents; and the continued issuance of overly burdensome and unnecessary requests for evidence. I believe USCIS will achieve its full potential as a 21st century immigration agency when its customer service and adjudicatory functions are consistently prioritized, resourced, and afforded equal oversight.

Consequently, as problems persist, the Ombudsman plays an important, independent role in ensuring that USCIS is responsive to its customers. At the Ombudsman's office, we work tirelessly to achieve the mission by providing expert case assistance to the public and by monitoring trends that reflect the existence and emergence of serious and pervasive issues within the agency. We formulate recommendations to USCIS—both formally and informally—to resolve those problems, and report to Congress areas where the agency still needs to improve.

The Ombudsman staff accomplishes this hefty mission with both dedication and resilience. It does so collaboratively and thoughtfully, caring for the customer often in ways he or she may not have experienced during the immigration process. One customer spoke to this hallmark of our work—that behind every application there is an individual, a family, an employee or an employer who deserves a fair process and timely case resolution:

* As we finalized this Report, the U.S. Supreme Court issued its decision in *U.S. v. Texas,* 579 U.S. ___ (June 23, 2016), leaving the court of appeals ruling in place and prohibiting implementation by U.S. Department of Homeland Security of the Deferred Action for Parents of American and Lawful Permanent Residents program (DAPA) and the expansion of the Deferred Action For Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. The current DACA policy, however, remains in place.

> I want to say a big thank you for sending a reply as promp[tly] as you did. It is nice to know that there is an organization like yours working with the immigration office to help applicants with their immigration problems with USCIS. This is the first time…that I feel there are people in the immigration office who really care about me as an applicant….Your email means a lot to me and has given me hope for my application.

During my tenure as Ombudsman, I have witnessed our small team successfully manage a 270 percent increase in requests for case assistance while timely meeting our reporting obligations; working to resolve complex policy issues; conducting over 100 stakeholder engagements annually; and hosting for 5 years in a row one of the most constructive immigration policy conferences in the country. I applaud the Ombudsman team for their dedication, creativity, and deep desire to show the public the very best of government. This Annual Report reflects their efforts over the past year to respond to rising and longstanding challenges in the delivery of immigration services.

I thank both Secretary Jeh Charles Johnson and Deputy Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas for their steadfast support of the Ombudsman's mission and its work. I would also like to thank USCIS Director León Rodríguez and the agency's Headquarters and field leadership for their continued collaboration to make the agency more effective.

Finally, the Ombudsman's work is strengthened by the active participation of our knowledgeable stakeholders. They routinely identify and share information on emerging trends, keeping us apprised where things go right and where improvement is needed. Their continued engagement is integral to our full understanding of the issues and their impact on the USCIS customer; we thank them for their feedback and dedication. We also work daily with dedicated officers throughout USCIS who share in our goal of providing immigration services grounded on fair treatment and superlative customer service. That the agency is able to perform its functions on a daily basis is due to their dedication to duty. All of these individuals inspire hope that, working together, we can develop consistent and lasting excellence in our immigration system.

Sincerely,

Maria M. Odom
Citizenship and Immigration Services Ombudsman