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Office of the Citizenship and Immigration Services Ombudsman

June 23, 2021



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The CIS Ombudsman's Webinar Series: Naturalization and Immigrant Integration

Disclaimer

This webinar material is intended solely as informational. It is not intended to, does not, and may not be relied upon to create or confer any right(s) or benefits(s), substantive or procedural, enforceable at law by any individual or other party in benefit applications before DHS, in removal proceedings, in litigation with the United States, or in any other form or manner. This webinar material does not have the force of law, or of a DHS directive.

Questions

- Submit written questions to us through the “Q&A box” that appears to the right of the slide deck on your screen.
- We will review every question submitted and determine if we can address concerns arising from the stakeholder community.
- Due to time constraints, we may not be able to answer every question.
- If you are a member of the media, please reach out to DHS Public Affairs with any inquiries.



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DHS Office of the Citizenship and Immigration Services Ombudsman

DHS Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services



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Executive Order on Restoring Faith in Our Legal Immigration Systems and Strengthening Integration and Inclusion Efforts for New Americans

Overview

- President Biden signed several executive orders (E.O.) after being sworn in as president on January 20, 2021. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has also announced changes that affect U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) operations.
- Out of 478 E.O. tasks for DHS, USCIS is assigned with 130 E.O. tasks (58 as lead and 72 as support).

Plan to Improve the Naturalization Process

- Section 5(a) directs the Secretary of State, the Attorney General, and the Secretary of Homeland Security to develop a plan describing any agency actions, in furtherance of the policy set forth in section 1 of E.O. 14012, that they will each take to improve the naturalization process and make it more accessible.
- USCIS submitted the plan to the White House on April 21, 2021.
- The plan outlines both short-term initiatives that can be accomplished within 12 months and long-term initiatives.

Plan to Improve the Naturalization Process

- Initiatives include recommendations that will eliminate barriers to naturalization, improve the naturalization process, reduce current processing times, make the naturalization process more accessible, and better facilitate citizenship and naturalization.
- We are also reviewing policies, regulations, and procedures regarding revocation of naturalization and passports.
- We are also expanding outreach on citizenship resources and materials through public engagement.

Accomplishments: Published Guidance

Reinstatement of the 2008 Civics Test

- On February 22, 2021, USCIS announced the reinstatement of the 2008 civics test, effective March 1, 2021. We provided a brief period during which USCIS also offered the 2020 version of the test to applicants affected by the timing of the update.

Preserving Continuous Residence and Physical Presence for Purposes of Naturalization while Engaged in Religious Duties Outside the United States

- On May 25, 2021, USCIS published guidance clarifying that applicants who are outside the United States to engage in ministerial or priestly functions may be eligible to apply to preserve their residence if they file Form N-470 before, during, or after their absence, even if the absence exceeds one year, and clarifying that they can meet the one-year physical presence requirement at any time before naturalization.

Accomplishments: Published Guidance

Naturalization Eligibility and Voter Registration Through a State's Benefit Application Process

- On May 27, 2021, USCIS published guidance regarding an applicant's registration to vote through a state's department of motor vehicles or other state benefit application process and the effects on an applicant's good moral character (GMC).

Veterans Residing Outside the United States and Naturalization

- On May 28, 2021, USCIS published guidance to clarify that certain veterans of the U.S. armed forces, who served honorably during specifically designated periods of hostility and meet all other statutory requirements for naturalization, are able to naturalize and become U.S. citizens in accordance with U.S. immigration laws, and that USCIS may coordinate with U.S. Customs and Border Protection to arrange an interview at a port of entry if necessary.

Comprehensive Review of Processes

Application for Naturalization (Form N-400)

- USCIS is currently reviewing the Form N-400 to ensure the form is more accessible and easier to understand by the public. This includes ensuring USCIS is asking appropriate questions to determine eligibility for the benefit.

Medical Certification for Disability Exceptions (Form N-648)

- On April 21, 2021, USCIS published the Form N-648 revision to the Federal Register with a 60-day notice. The public comment period closed on June 21, 2021. USCIS will review the comments and evaluate any concerns based on public feedback.

Efforts to Facilitate Citizenship and Naturalization

Video Interviews for Military Members Stationed or Deployed Overseas

- In November 2020, USCIS began conducting video interviews at several overseas Department of Defense's (DOD) facilities for military applicants. This pilot initiative proved to be successful, and USCIS is now adding video naturalization ceremonies for military applicants and qualifying family members at DOD facilities, which is the final step in the naturalization process. The first video oath ceremony was conducted on March 29, 2021.

Disability Accommodations

Reasonable Accommodations

- A request for a disability accommodation can be made by:
 - Contacting the USCIS Contact Center at 1-800-375-5283 (TTY: 1-800-767-1833);
 - Submitting the [online accommodations request](#) form; or
 - Request an accommodation with the field office at any time during the naturalization process.

Efforts to Make the Naturalization Process More Accessible

Possible Centralization of Disability Accommodation Requests

- Currently, USCIS field offices receive requests through the Service Request Management Tool (SRMT) system directly and consult with the USCIS Public Disability Access program, as needed.
- USCIS is planning to pilot a program with the Office of Equal Opportunity and Inclusion to centrally receive and review public disability accommodation requests.
- USCIS already centralizes employee accommodations, and we are reviewing to determine if similar centralization efforts will lead to increased consistency and provide a more streamlined process for public applicants.
- USCIS has initiated a proof of concept in one district and will study the results to determine if centralization should expand.

Efforts to Make the Naturalization Process More Accessible

Fees

- USCIS is conducting a comprehensive review of fees for adjudication and naturalization services to ensure that naturalization and other immigration benefits remains accessible to low-income applicants. This will mean that other fee-paying applicants and petitioners will continue to subsidize this policy decision to ensure full cost recovery.

Fee Waivers

- USCIS will continue to maintain fee waiver availability in the new fee rule. Fee waiver eligibility criteria will remain the same, and additional fee exemptions will be included for humanitarian programs. USCIS will also consider offering reduced fees to applicants who file online irrespective of online petition or application-type. USCIS anticipates that a final fee rule will not likely be published before FY 2022.

COVID-19 Best Practices

- USCIS offices were temporarily closed to the public from March 18 until June 3, 2020, in order to limit potential COVID-19 exposure risk to employees and applicants.
- Examples of USCIS flexibilities provided to applicants:
 - Extended deadlines response times for certain requests, notices and appeals;
 - Accept reproduced signatures (Go to www.uscis.gov/about-us/uscis-response-to-covid-19 for comprehensive description of flexibilities.)
- USCIS field offices established innovative plans and processes to resume in person services following necessary safety protocols.

Naturalization Ceremonies

- USCIS field offices creatively established outdoor, drive-thru and drive-in administrative ceremonies to ensure eligible candidates safely completed the naturalization process.
- Resumed judicial ceremonies as courts have reopened to the public.
- Established video-facilitated processes with DOD partners facilities to safely resume overseas military naturalizations appointments for service members and family living abroad.
- Eligible naturalization candidates were and remain a top priority to schedule for oath ceremonies.

Plan to Improve the Naturalization Process

Next steps:

- Within 180 days of the issuance of the plan developed pursuant to subsection (a) of this section, the Secretary of State, the Attorney General, and the Secretary of Homeland Security shall each submit a report to the President describing the progress in implementing the plan, any barriers to implementing the plan, and any additional areas of concern that should be addressed to ensure that eligible individuals are able to apply for naturalization in a fair and efficient manner.

Interagency Strategy to Promote Naturalization

- As required by Section 5(c) of the Executive Order on Restoring Faith in Our Legal Immigration Systems and Strengthening Integration and Inclusion Efforts for New Americans (E.O. 14012), the U.S. Departments of Homeland Security (DHS), Education (ED), Health and Human Services (HHS), State (DOS), Labor (DOL), Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Defense (DOD), Justice (DOJ), Veterans Affairs (VA), Agriculture (USDA), and the Social Security Administration (SSA) established the Naturalization Working Group (NWG) to develop a national strategy to promote naturalization.
- The working group drafted a plan which outlines its recommendations, some of which are already being implemented.

Interagency Strategy to Promote Naturalization

- Initiatives include recommendations that will raise awareness of the importance of citizenship, promote civic integration and inclusion, provide immigrants with opportunities and tools to become fully engaged citizens, and build community capacity to prepare immigrants for citizenship.

Interagency Strategy to Promote Naturalization

Accomplishments to Date

- Announced policy updates to return to the use of the term “integration” and employ the term “non-citizen.”
- Outstanding Americans By Choice (ABC) Recognition: USCIS Initiative publicly recognizes individuals who have chosen to become Americans and have made significant contributions to both their communities and the nation through civic participation, professional achievement, and responsible citizenship.
 - Recognized two ABC candidates during a special naturalization ceremony held at USCIS HQ on May 27 in commemoration of Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month (first time since 2017).
 - Additional ABC candidates are under consideration for 2021.

USCIS Citizenship and Integration Grant Program (Grant Program)

- We published two notices of funding opportunities (NOFO) on May 17, that prioritize the funding of organizations that serve underserved and marginalized communities. Applications are due by July 16.
- These two NOFOs reflect input from the House Appropriations Committee and other stakeholders.
- Office of Citizenship engaged with national stakeholders on June 9 to discuss the FY 2021 Grant Program NOFOs.
- For more information, visit www.uscis.gov/citizenship_and_grants.gov (use search term “citizenship and integration”).

Collaborations and Partnerships

- Health and Human Services (HHS), Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR): USCIS conducted a webinar for 358 representatives of community-based organizations at the invitation of the HHS/ORR.
- Department of Justice (DOJ), Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR): USCIS held a joint engagement on June 22 with DOJ/EOIR on USCIS funding opportunities, and the process for securing DOJ recognition and accreditation.
- Today's joint engagement with DHS/CRCL and CIS Ombudsman on naturalization and integration.

Interagency Strategy to Promote Naturalization Accomplishments to Date

- Since February 2021, USCIS has conducted adult citizenship education webinars to over 1500 participants that includes:
 - Adult citizenship educators; and
 - Community-based organizations that provide services to immigrants.
- USCIS will continue to offer similar webinars throughout the year.



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Q&A Session



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