



**Homeland
Security**

The CIS Ombudsman’s Webinar Series: USCIS and CIS Ombudsman Joint Engagements on USCIS’ Fiscal Challenges

On October 28, 2020, the Department of Homeland Security’s Office of the Citizenship and Immigration Services Ombudsman (CIS Ombudsman) hosted the first of two webinar sessions to discuss how U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is managing adjudications and operations given its fiscal challenges as a result of COVID-19. Subject matter experts (SMEs) from USCIS joined the webinar. The second session in this series will be held on Thursday, November 19, 2020, from 3:00 to 4:00 p.m. EDT.

During this first session, Citizenship and Immigration Services Ombudsman Michael Dougherty and USCIS Deputy Director for Policy Joseph Edlow kicked-off a conversation to provide the public with an understanding of the impacts of USCIS’ current financial situation. Mr. Edlow stated that while receipts have steadily increased at USCIS over the past few months, the situation has not improved significantly, requiring the agency to curtail spending while maintaining operations. Among the impacts, a hiring freeze continues, and contracting operations have been dramatically reduced. Furthermore, due to COVID-19, USCIS was obliged to close offices for months and implement social distancing guidelines that reduced productivity for interview-dependent work as well as in-person services.

The second portion of this webinar was facilitated by Citizenship and Immigration Services Deputy Ombudsman Nathan Stiefel. Mr. Stiefel had a dialogue with agency SMEs who relayed information and answered questions on what the public can expect when interacting with USCIS and how the ongoing budget challenges impact the allocation and prioritization of resources, workload shifts, and services at the Contact Centers and Application Support Centers (ASCs), respectively. For example, USCIS’ SMEs mentioned that it is typical for ASCs to take 90 days or more to send appointment notices after ASCs reopened. As for workload shifts at the service centers, USCIS confirmed that workloads have shifted within centers and not between centers – i.e. more resources were directed to adjudicate Form I-130, Petition for Alien Relative, and Form I-90, Application to Replace Permanent Resident Card, both filed electronically. Moreover, USCIS indicated that filing online is a best practice to reduce rejections, given that the intake system logic helps prevent common mistakes and the submission of incomplete filings.

Nearly 600 stakeholders joined this webinar [attorneys/legal representatives – 40%, employers – 13%, government workers – 19%, petitioners/applicants – 6%, and others – 22%]. Participants submitted 95 written questions, several of which Mr. Stiefel posed to USCIS SMEs during the engagement, on topics such as increased processing times, guidance for scheduling emergency in-person appointments, delayed biometrics appointment rescheduling, resumption of naturalization application interviews and oath ceremonies and family-based interviews, as well as erroneous rejections at the lockbox and the service centers. Below is a sample of the questions received:

- Is USCIS currently seeking appropriations from Congress to address budget shortfalls?
- How many contractors have been furloughed to date? Are there any additional contractor furloughs planned?
- What can the public expect in terms of live support at the Contact Centers due to the agency's limited resources?
- Will certain application types be given priority in processing and interview scheduling?
- Will individuals see a delay in receiving receipt notices?
- Will the production and mailing of secure documents take longer?

A full list of inquiries will be shared with USCIS to give the agency an opportunity to address the public's concerns.

Speakers:

- Michael Dougherty, Ombudsman
- Nathan Stiefel, Deputy Ombudsman
- Bertha Anderson, Chief of Public Engagement at the Ombudsman's Office
- Joseph Edlow, Deputy Director for Policy at USCIS
- Connie Nolan, Deputy Associate Director at USCIS
- Terri Robinson, Director of the National Benefits Center at USCIS
- Mary Herrmann, Chief of the Public Services Division at USCIS
- Courtney Winship, Chief of the Digital Services Division at USCIS
- Lisa Manahan, Deputy Chief of the Document Management Division at USCIS
- Laurie Goudge, Branch Chief of Adjustment of Status at USCIS
- Sheri Sheehan, Program Manager at USCIS