

OBSERVATIONS AND STAKEHOLDER COMMENTS FROM THE OMBUDSMAN'S TRIPS AND MEETINGS

The Ombudsman's staff visited five USCIS asylum offices during the reporting period to observe the: (1) administration and efficiency of asylum processing and credible fear determination; (2) fraud detection practices, actual and proposed; (3) quality assurance methods employed; and (4) technological advances currently in operation. Offices visited were Newark, Los Angeles, Arlington, New York, and Miami. 

During these visits the Ombudsman's staff had discussions with individuals from office management, adjudication staff, clerical support, quality assurance and training, fraud detection, and security. The overall impression is of a workforce that wants to be customer-centric, but is affected by production goals. 

The asylum process starts with the asylum application, Form I-589, a 12-page form supplemented with 11 pages of instructions. Comprehending these instructions requires at minimum a reading ability at a high level, which is alarming when half of all Americans read at the 8th-grade or lower level.⁸⁸ Even more alarming is that Form I-589 specifically serves a population for whom English may be the second language, as a lack of English language ability is commonplace among asylum seekers. 

Asylum officers seem to have extremely limited access to any investigative support -- locally and internationally -- to help verify events, locations, and persons referenced in asylum applications. As applicant credibility is critical to asylum determinations, asylum officers should have timely access to investigative services to corroborate claims. 

RECOMMENDATION AR 2007 -- 25

The Ombudsman recommends that USCIS redraft Form I-589, the asylum application, so that it is less complicated and more understandable by the intended audience – persons who have been persecuted based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. 

⁸⁸ See Darrell M. West, "State and Federal E-Government in the United States" at 6 (Sept. 2003); <http://www.insidepolitics.org/egovt03us.pdf> (last visited June 5, 2007).