

The current processing time reporting provides less information to customers and makes the processing times more opaque. Transparency inherently leads to more efficient government services and greater accountability. USCIS should strive to be transparent and provide as much information to customers as possible.

#### **CASE PROBLEM**

*In 2004, a foreign national and his U.S. citizen wife applied for removal of the conditions of residence using Form I-751 (Petition to Remove the Conditions of Residence) at a field office. The petition was forwarded to a service center. Over 25 months later, the petition remained pending. Without providing the applicant any reason for the delay, USCIS informed him that his file was transferred to another service center. The individual contacted the Ombudsman in the middle of 2006 because the case was outside normal processing times. The case eventually was approved.* 

#### **RECOMMENDATION AR 2007 --03**

*Currently, USCIS provides processing times based on agency goals, rather than actual processing time as it previously provided. In addition to the agency's responsibility to be transparent, green card applicants in particular should know if applications will be processed within 90 days, rather than the 180-day target time, to avoid applying unnecessarily for interim benefits. The Ombudsman recommends that USCIS return to providing the public with actual processing times for each field office.* 

#### **D. Customer Service**

During the reporting period, USCIS made important strides in customer service. USCIS increased the number of appointments available via INFOPASS and began two new contracts in the effort to improve its toll-free customer service line.

**BEST PRACTICES**

*The Ombudsman commends USCIS' Information and Customer Service Division for developing the following:* 

- (1) The direct access military hotline for service members and their families to inquire about USCIS applications.* 
- (2) Well-designed and easy to understand pamphlets on such topics as INFOPASS and the new change of address system.* 
- (3) "Linda Liberty and Friends Take A Roadtrip Across America," an activity worksheet, with specific civics education-related projects, that is provided to children along with a box of crayons.* 

Conversely, the Ombudsman continued to observe other areas where the lack of communication with customers persists: (1) limited customer access to USCIS immigration officers who know about individual cases to resolve an inquiry accurately and efficiently; (2) questionable accuracy of information provided by customer service representatives; and (3) the practice of providing minimal information in response to customer inquiries. As noted in all three prior annual reports, customers often call USCIS numerous times, make frequent visits to USCIS facilities, and ask for congressional assistance to determine case status.

**CASE PROBLEM**

*An applicant received her green card in 2006 after a two-year delay. However, the name on the green card contained typographical errors. The applicant promptly returned the green card with an application for a new card using Form I-90. A month later, the applicant received a notice that the fee was waived for the I-90 because the errors were USCIS' mistake. However, the I-90 receipt notice stated an incorrect city for the applicant's residence, despite the correct city noted on the I-90 application. The applicant called the NCSC and was advised that the information would be forwarded to the appropriate USCIS office and that future communications would be sent to the correct address. Two months later, the applicant received another green card, but it contained a new typographical error misspelling her middle name. The applicant had to restart the process filing another Form I-90.* 

**BEST PRACTICES**

*Des Moines* and other field offices in the Central Region distribute customer surveys in the waiting area to solicit feedback regarding the level of service provided by the information counter. 

In *El Paso*, an officer is assigned on a weekly basis to take recurring inquiries. This officer also provides backup to the supervisor and is the backup interviewer. 

*El Paso* officers issue “come-back passes” for applicants who lack a document to return the same day so the case can be completed without further delay. 

The *Washington Field Office* Director meets with attorney groups and community based organizations every other month. These groups email a list of cases for status updates and the Director provides the update at the meeting. 

The Ombudsman is encouraged by the continuation of teleconferences held by the Nebraska Service Center and a few other offices to discuss issues of importance to stakeholders. The Ombudsman encourages all USCIS field and service center offices to adopt this or a similar practice of direct communication with customers and stakeholders. 

**1. INFOPASS**

The Ombudsman commends the new USCIS leadership team as well as field office management for their attention to ensuring appointments are available and for the substantial improvements in the management and administration of INFOPASS during the reporting period. Started by the Miami District Office to address the problem of long lines at facilities, INFOPASS has emerged as one of the most important customer service initiatives by USCIS. It is a valuable on-line service that allows applicants to schedule an in-person appointment with a field office.

The Ombudsman criticized INFOPASS in previous annual reports because the appointment scheduler replaced physical waiting lines with invisible, digital waiting lines. Over the past two years, the Ombudsman has regularly tested INFOPASS by logging on to the website and seeking to schedule appointments at various field offices. Appointments have been readily available over the past year compared to previous tests that often yielded a message that no appointments were available. In addition, the Ombudsman has noted a dramatic reduction in the number of concerns raised about INFOPASS appointments during the Ombudsman’s travel, teleconferences, and other discussions with stakeholders in this reporting period.

During the reporting period, USCIS modified INFOPASS appointment scheduling at many offices. The agency also addressed fraudulent practices in relation to scheduling INFOPASS appointments by using technology effectively. The Ombudsman applauds USCIS’ efforts to make INFOPASS appointments available the same day or the next day for all

customers. Only two offices, New York City and Portland, Oregon, had no INFOPASS appointments available for three or more days.<sup>31</sup>

The Ombudsman also is encouraged by USCIS plans to introduce INFOPASS kiosks nationally to ensure that customers have electronic access to appointment scheduling. Availability of kiosks was one of the key provisions of the Ombudsman's INFOPASS recommendation in 2004.<sup>32</sup> The Ombudsman continues to urge USCIS field offices to adopt innovative approaches to customer needs.

While it is important to note progress in the administration of INFOPASS, it remains a limited system. The system cannot compile information on issues addressed during the appointments, which limits USCIS leadership's ability to identify and correct systemic problems that require repeated customer visits.

The Ombudsman understands that USCIS' Office of Information Technology and the Office of Transformation are working jointly to modernize USCIS legacy scheduling systems, which are used not only for INFOPASS but also for appointments at ASCs and interviews at field offices. The main goal of this project is to provide customers greater control and access over their appointments with USCIS.

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<sup>31</sup> See USCIS INFOPASS Usage Statistics, accessed by the Ombudsman on June 3, 2007, which showed appointments available for June 4-8, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> See section V.11 for the Ombudsman's INFOPASS recommendation summary.

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

*The **Washington Field Office** accepts walk-ins without an INFOPASS appointment for triage. The Immigration Information Officer (IIO) decides if there is an urgent reason or emergency for the individual to be seen that day.* 

*The **Des Moines Field Office** uses an appointment request form that can be used to obtain a walk-in appointment. The office also uses an "Emergency Request Form."* 

***Garden City** is not a full-service office. There is an information counter, but not enough IIOs to staff INFOPASS appointments due to apparent space issues. A new facility under development is approximately two years from completion.* 

*In the **Kansas City Field Office**, customers without INFOPASS appointments are turned away, unless they drive more than 50 miles to reach the office.* 

*Stakeholders in **El Paso** complain that INFOPASS appointments are often difficult to obtain.* 

## 2. National Customer Service Center

USCIS uses the NCSC to provide customers inside the United States with toll-free access to a call center with live operator assistance in either English or Spanish.

The two-tier system of assistance, as described in the Ombudsman's 2006 Annual Report (at p. 34), remains. For the majority of the year, waiting times in "Tier 1" and "Tier 2" were extremely long.<sup>33</sup> However, USCIS has addressed this problem in more recent months. At the end of 2006, USCIS replaced the Tier 1 contractor with two contracts. The new contracts have improved quality control features and customers have begun to experience the positive results of these measures. In recent months, the Ombudsman observed shortened wait time to talk with a call representative. The Ombudsman understands from a recent meeting with the USCIS Customer Assistance Office (CAO) that since November 2006, the average NCSC wait times are less than 30 seconds to speak with a Tier 1 representative and two minutes for Tier 2. The reduction in wait times was confirmed in a recent meeting with USCIS.

During the reporting period, the Ombudsman continued to hear about problems with the NCSC: (1) Tier 1 representatives do not have enough immigration knowledge to process a request and have no access to case files; (2) the Tier 1 representatives have difficulty identifying the actual problems and nature of the inquiries; (3) customers have difficulty getting transferred to a more knowledgeable IIO; (4) customers continue to describe inconsistencies in responses if

<sup>33</sup> See Figure 6.

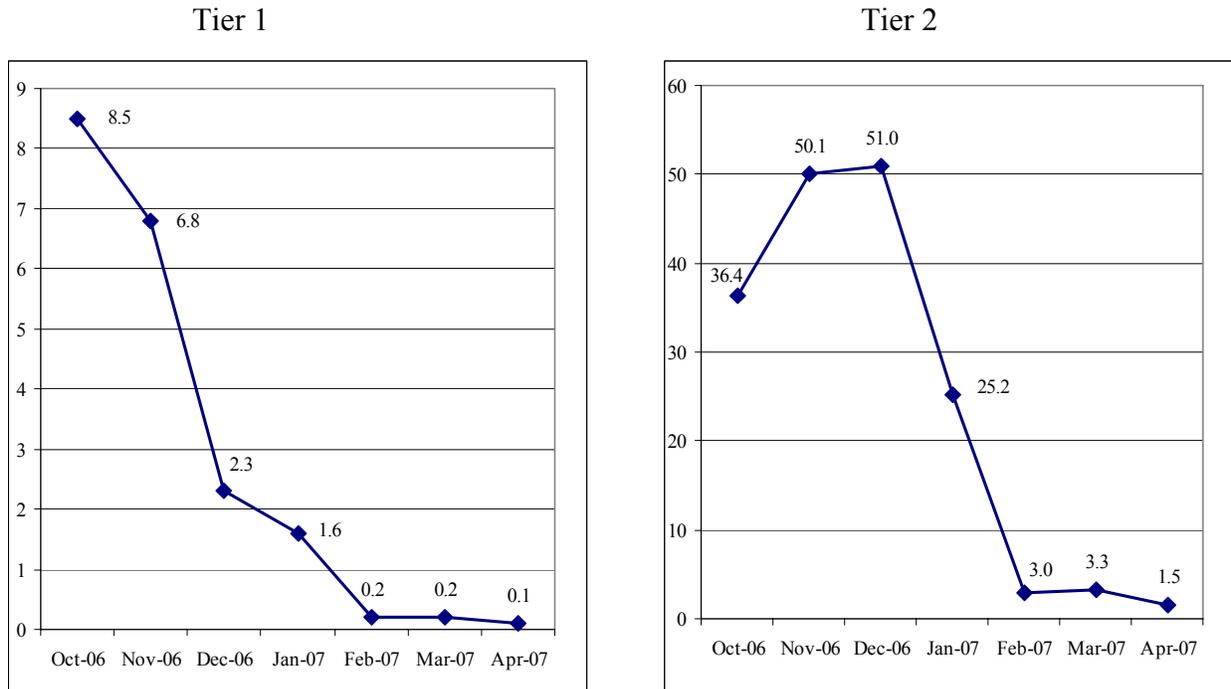
they call several times about the same issue; and (5) there is still a lack of conclusive responses or incorrect responses provided by Tier 1 representatives.

*COMMENT FROM OMBUDSMAN'S TELECONFERENCE*

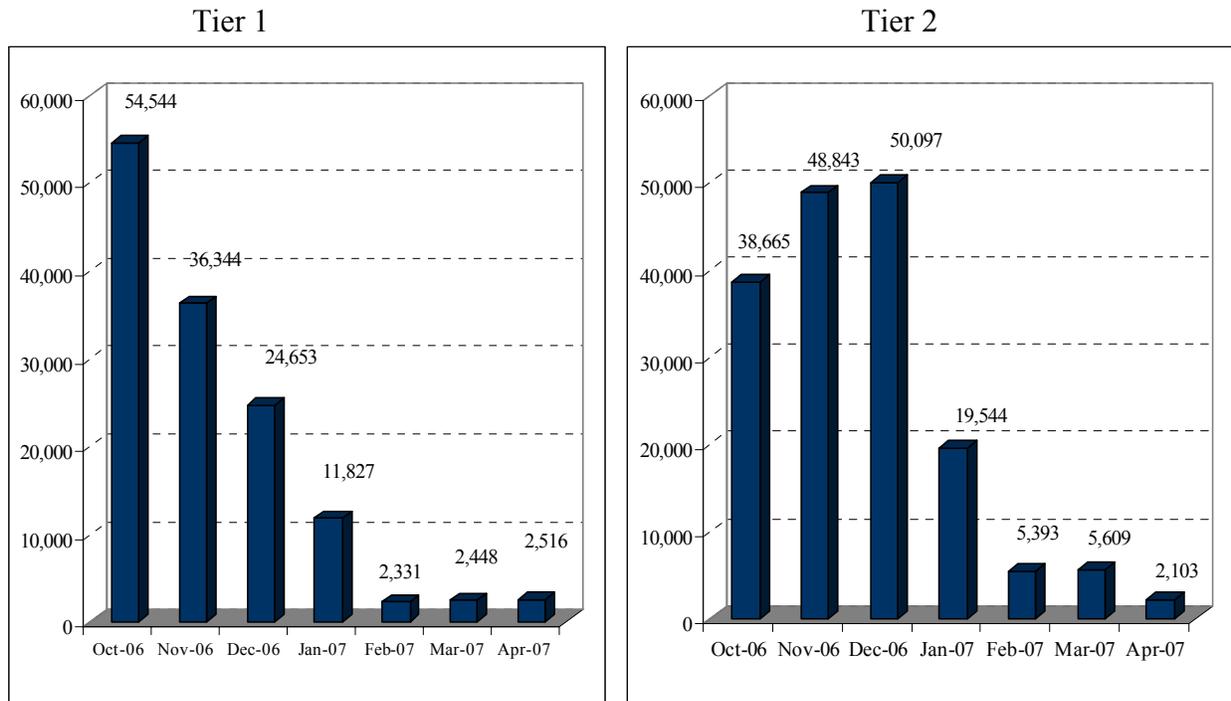
*A caller described the NCSC's inability to fix errors. He filed a TPS application on behalf of a client and the receipt came back with the A-number transposed. He called the NCSC to fix the error and learned at an INFOPASS appointment a few months later that the error still was not fixed.* 

The Ombudsman relayed the NCSC concerns to USCIS and learned that the new Information and Customer Service Division Director is systematically addressing them. Recent data received from this Division demonstrate dramatic improvement in some of these areas:

**Figure 6: NCSC Average Time to Answer Call in Minutes, FY 07 YTD**



**Figure 7: NCSC Average Call Abandonment (Number of Callers), FY 07 YTD**



The Ombudsman can report positively that USCIS is improving the NCSC. The Ombudsman understands that USCIS plans to give Tier 1 access to USCIS systems to respond more accurately with case information. At such time, Tier 2 would become a case resolution entity for more complex issues.

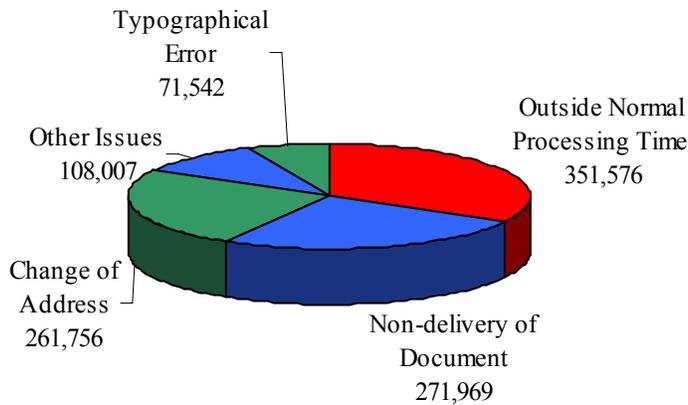
As described in the Ombudsman’s 2006 Annual Report (at p. 34), call centers were designed to take a substantial workload off the service centers and field offices. Instead, the Service Request Management Tool (SRMT) sends this work back to the field offices. The problems with this part of the system as described in last year’s annual report remain. The SRMT system itself continues to be backlogged. During the Ombudsman’s visit to the NBC in April 2007, the NBC reported that it had 70,000 pending SRMT requests with approximately 15,000 completed each month. During this visit, the NBC was in the process of responding to SRMTs received in December 2006.

In its 2006 Annual Report Response (at p. 13), USCIS indicated:

[The agency] is working toward putting the SRMT protocol and inquiry process on-line for customers. In conjunction with the current case status services USCIS provides, this will let customers generate referrals. This enhancement is in the initial development stage.

The Ombudsman looks forward to understanding more about the development of the new SRMT protocol.

**Figure 8: SRMT Volume by Type, May 2006 – April 2007**



The Ombudsman’s previous recommendations and annual reports address all of the issues reflected in Figure 8, which was provided by the USCIS Information and Customer Service Division. In previous reporting periods, USCIS has not had such data readily available, which has prevented the Ombudsman from evaluating improvements to customer service. The Ombudsman is encouraged by the positive approach of the new USCIS leadership in the Information and Customer Service Division to resolve many of the pervasive and serious issues identified.

***BEST PRACTICE***

*A helpful feature incorporated into the toll-free customer service line is inclusion of messages on recent developments in immigration.* 

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

*IIOs at Newark reported that they talk to attorneys, applicants, and community-based representatives who receive incorrect information from the NCSC. IIOs suggest that applicants should know the NCSC only provides general information.* 

*Stakeholders in New York complained that additional training is needed for NCSC operators.* 

*A stakeholder in the Chicago area reported that customer service (through the NCSC) is not working, especially when applicants try to reach Tier 2. Another stakeholder commented there is no access to local district officers.* 

*A visit to the Kentucky Call Center revealed that Tier 1 operators do not have access to helpful information to answer calls and some operators speak very quickly to callers with limited English language ability.* 

### *COMMENTS FROM OMBUDSMAN'S TELECONFERENCE*

*One caller questioned why the NCSC and Case Status Online do not reflect denials.* 

*Another caller mentioned that some adjudicators, particularly at the Nebraska and Texas Service Centers, just call the applicant or attorney to ask him/her to provide missing information.* 

### *RECOMMENDATION AR 2007 -- 04*

*The Ombudsman recommends that USCIS adopt the frequently asked questions format used by Customs and Border Protection (CBP), incorporating a dynamic search feature on the website, rather than a static FAQ list. In addition, USCIS should provide a service on the website whereby customers can email a question and receive an answer within a short period of time.* 

**RECOMMENDATION AR 2007 -- 05**

*The Ombudsman further recommends that USCIS adopt a national process similar to that in the San Diego Field Office wherein an applicant who has not received a decision after an interview can contact the District Adjudications Officer (DAO) via email. If the DAO fails to respond within a set period of time, the applicant should be able to contact the supervisor. If there is still no response, the applicant should be able to contact the District Director.*

**BEST PRACTICES:**

*The Ombudsman considers it a best practice to:*

*(1) Provide email access for customers to inquire about case status. Providing this opportunity for case status inquiries alleviates the burden on INFOPASS and leaves more slots open to the public.* 

*(2) Have a duty officer at each field office location assigned to handle inquiries for customers who appear for a second INFOPASS appointment based on a previously unresolved inquiry. A few field offices have adopted this approach to reduce the number of repetitive visits as well as identify and correct systemic problems.* 

**3. Case Status Online**

USCIS customers can use the internet-based Case Status Online to check case status if they have application/petition receipt numbers. The primary shortcomings of this resource, noted in previous annual reports, all remain.<sup>34</sup> Case Status Online information is often inaccurate or unreliable, which can have serious consequences for the individual. For example, the resource often shows a case is “pending,” although it was denied and the applicant or representative never received the decision. This is the same information the Tier 1 NCSC representatives provide to a caller, as they do not have access to any internal databases. As a result, an applicant may unwittingly forgo challenging a decision from lack of information. Moreover, there is no avenue to prove non-receipt of the notice and USCIS does not make copies of notices readily available.

<sup>34</sup> See Ombudsman’s 2006 Annual Report (at p. 35); Ombudsman’s 2005 Annual Report (at p. 14).

**CASE PROBLEM**

*The applicant who filed a green card application in 2002 is a physician who obtained a National Interest Waiver in exchange for working in an underserved area. After five years, the applicant forwarded the paperwork regarding this work to the USCIS service center where the green card application was pending. The applicant checked Case Status Online to ascertain if the service center received the information, but the system showed no such information. The applicant called the NCSC and, in response, received a letter that the file was pending due to security checks.*

*The next month, the applicant again contacted the NCSC. In response, the applicant received a letter that USCIS was holding the file because the applicant did not mail in the five-year service requirement information.*

*The applicant made an INFOPASS appointment at the local office to obtain case status information and the IIO said to wait six weeks. The next month, the applicant made another INFOPASS appointment. The IIO at the local office called the service center where the application was located and indicated that the information was received, the file was complete, and the adjudication should be forthcoming by year's end.*

*In early 2007, the applicant still had not heard from USCIS. By that time, the applicant moved to another state and filed the required change of address with USCIS. The applicant made another INFOPASS appointment at the local USCIS office. USCIS told the applicant that the information obtained from the other IIO was verbal and unreliable, the case was pending due to security checks, and the IIO could not confirm that the file was complete.*

*Shortly thereafter, the applicant called the NCSC again. In response, the applicant received a letter that indicated the case was pending because the service center did not have the information about completion of the five-year's work. Based on this information, the applicant made another INFOPASS appointment at the local office. The IIO indicated that the case appeared to be in order, but the IIO did not have access to the file at the service center where the application was pending and could not confirm anything.*

*In March 2007, the applicant called the NCSC again and also contacted the Ombudsman. The Case Status Online information still is dated October 2005 and states that the biometrics fees for the case were received. The case remains pending.* 