



**U.S. Citizenship
and Immigration
Services**

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Written Testimony

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Subcommittee on Homeland Security**

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Good morning, Chairwoman Roybal-Allard, Ranking Member Fleischmann, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for taking time to hear from me today; I am honored to have this opportunity to update you on our agency's budget, our dedicated workforce, and our ongoing efforts to improve and strengthen our programs, policies, and priorities, which are grounded in fulfilling our incredible mission of upholding America's promise as a nation of welcome and possibility for all those we serve. My name is Ur Mendoza Jaddou, and I am the Director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, a component of the Department of Homeland Security and the agency that administers the lawful immigration system for our country. It's always great to return to the Hill, particularly the House of Representatives where I served as a staffer on the House Judiciary Committee for many years. Now, as Director of USCIS, I am proud and excited to forge a stronger relationship between the Appropriations committees and our agency.

With your support, USCIS has received appropriations in the past, primarily to fund E-Verify and the Citizenship and Integration Grant Program; however, most recently the FY 2022 appropriations included an additional \$275 million for USCIS to assist our efforts to reduce backlogs and support the President's refugee admissions ceiling of 125,000. In addition, USCIS is also appreciative of the \$193 million in funding support for the Operation Allies Welcome efforts you provided in the FY 2022 Continuing Resolution as part of the Afghanistan Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2022. Now, in the President's FY 2023 Budget, USCIS is requesting funding that strengthens and supports our efforts to administer our lawful immigration system with fairness, integrity, and respect for all we serve. I believe the American public deserves nothing less and am keenly aware that every application we adjudicate not only represents the hopes and dreams of individual immigrants and their families, but also an opportunity to strengthen our nation.

Before we delve into the specifics of the budget, I want to note the work USCIS has done over the past year. A series of executive orders provided us with guideposts and milestones to improve our immigration system by removing barriers that prevent it from operating smoothly, securely, and responsively. One of the biggest barriers we face are a legacy of backlogs and lengthening processing times for our applications, delays that help no one.

Each case represents a person, a family, an opportunity, and a dream. It also represents a chance for our communities and our country to more fully benefit from the talents and energy immigrants have to offer. Every single applicant who seeks a benefit from USCIS should get an answer – be it yes or no – in a reasonable amount of time.

We currently have about 8.5 million pending cases and of those cases, about 5.3 million have been pending beyond published processing times. There are many reasons for these delays – the devastating effects of the pandemic on our ability to conduct our work, a fiscal crisis USCIS had never experienced, and staffing vacancies. Our employees are dedicated, innovative, and hardworking. Many continued to do important work that required them to come into the office, even during the pandemic. Others found innovative ways to conduct their work away from the office, while not sacrificing its integrity or quality. Today, there simply are not enough of them. To help us track and reduce our processing times and backlog, we are focused on increasing staffing, together with the proper resources, some policy and outdated operational changes, and

better technology. While we know we have a lot of work ahead of us, I am energized to take it on, and I believe I can say the same for the entire USCIS workforce. We are now guided by a new mission statement: “USCIS upholds America’s promise as a nation of welcome and possibility with fairness, integrity, and respect for all we serve.” This new mission statement affirms our commitment to an immigration system that is accessible and humane and reflects the character of both our country and our Agency.

To deliver on our new mission statement, I have also laid out my five agency priorities:

1. *Strengthen USCIS Fiscal Health and Management:* We must ensure USCIS has the resources to responsibly manage its existing workload and execute key administration priorities. This includes proposing and finalizing a new, equitable fee structure that balances our fiscal needs with our goals of promoting access to the immigration system.
2. *Increase Hiring and Improve Employee Morale:* We must attract, recruit, train, and retain a diverse and resilient workforce. We are marshaling our resources to fill nearly 4,000 vacancies and welcome your partnership in building a new generation of public servants who represent the best and brightest that America stands for. We also know that we need to support our existing employees, so they are excited about our mission and their work that helps us achieve it, including having a voice in shaping our agency for the future.
3. *Promote Efficiency in USCIS Adjudications:* We are implementing a robust strategy that gives our workforce the tools to efficiently adjudicate cases and reduce the time individuals wait for decisions. And to get there, we cannot simply employ approaches that have us working “harder” or “faster.” We need to make meaningful changes to our processes and systems. While ensuring integrity and national security, we will use every available policy and operational tool to achieve reasonable processing times.
4. *Deliver on our Humanitarian Mission:* Time and again, USCIS is called to respond to humanitarian emergencies. We must be resourced and well positioned to fulfill this ever-growing, critical mission for our nation’s interests.
5. *Strengthen Public Engagement and Improve Customer Service:* We are working every day to inspire trust by rebuilding relationships and communications with the communities we serve and ensuring applicants and petitioners have timely, meaningful access to assistance and resources.

While I know there is still much more work to do, we have already made great strides:

- *Hiring:* We have been working diligently to bring on new staff to fill many existing vacancies that could not be addressed during the year-long hiring freeze we experienced through mid-2021. I have implemented a hiring plan to achieve filling 95 percent of our

vacancies by the end of calendar year 2022; currently, we have over 120 external hiring announcements that will help us fill hundreds of vacancies. Additionally, we have over 450 individuals in the onboarding pipeline. To retain a bright and talented workforce, it was important to offer well-deserved promotions and new opportunities for the many dedicated, experienced USCIS employees already in our ranks who patiently waited during our hiring freeze. Now, we are focusing on external recruitment and pursuing other efficiencies in our hiring process to fill as many vacancies as possible before the end of the calendar year.

- *Streamlined processing:* I recently announced new processing, or cycle time goals for many key forms, including Employment Authorization Documents, Adjustment of Status, Deferred Action Childhood Arrival renewals, Immigrant Petition for Alien Worker, and Petition for a Nonimmigrant worker. We hope to achieve these goals by the end of FY 2023. It will take much work and ingenuity, but I am confident we can get there.
- *Technology:* We have a plan to implement end-to-end electronic filing, processing, payment, and case management for USCIS. We have already made strides in implementing online filing options, including for Employment Authorization Documents.
- *Regulatory /Policy Review:* We continue to review and revise regulatory and policy decisions with an eye towards breaking down unnecessary barriers that have hindered access to immigration benefits in a timely manner.
- *Public Engagement:* We have adapted to the virtual engagement environment. In FY 2021, we held more than 2,000 virtual engagements, with approximately 74,000 attendees, including 2,069 local engagements and 47 national engagements, covering more than 20 topics. I believe we are on track to have even more engagement activities in FY 2022, including more in-person meetings as the COVID pandemic restrictions continue to ease.

I am clear eyed about the challenges ahead and recognize that the work of our agency is growing. This is why I am so excited to speak with you today about our budget and how it will help us fulfill our mission and my priorities.

The FY 2023 Budget supports the President's priorities by restoring faith in the immigration system, including implementation of a fair and efficient asylum process. A recently finalized asylum processing rule will ensure that those who are eligible for asylum are granted relief quickly while those who are denied following a final decision are promptly removed. When fully implemented, we expect our asylum-related efficiencies will shorten the process to several months for most asylum applicants covered by the rule.

The President's Budget ensures that the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program embodies America's commitment to protect the most vulnerable.

Consistent and dedicated funding through appropriations is necessary to address our growing humanitarian workloads. Our asylum and refugee programs do not require fees, and without appropriated resources, the costs associated with these programs must be borne by all other fee-paying applicants and petitioners. As those costs increase, so do the costs to our fee-paying applicants and petitioners. As such, the President's FY 2023 Budget seeks to shift our humanitarian programs from fee funding to appropriations, aligning our agency with the appropriations received by other agencies doing similar work.

Importantly, this funding supports USCIS' multi-year plan to reduce the backlog and will resource critical investments in cybersecurity and sustain the E-Verify program. USCIS is grateful for the appropriated funding we have already received in FY 2022 to support backlog reduction, and refugee processing. With these resources USCIS now has the dedicated funding to support refugee admissions up to 125,000, by hiring new staff to handle the significantly larger workload. Additionally, USCIS is prioritizing additional staff and technology improvements to reduce our growing backlog, prioritizing those resources on forms such as Employment Authorization Documents, Applications for Asylum and Withholding of Removal, and Applications for Naturalization. These funds were essential to the progress our agency has already made. The President's FY 2023 Budget will continue to build on this foundation and ensure that USCIS can successfully uphold America's promise as a nation of welcome and possibility with fairness, integrity, and respect for all we serve.

Chairwoman Roybal-Allard, Ranking Member Fleischmann, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for your continued support our incredible and unique mission at USCIS, and thank you again for affording me the opportunity to appear before you and discuss the Department's FY 2023 Budget. I look forward to your questions.