



**House Judiciary Committee  
Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship  
For a hearing “*Oversight of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services*”  
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**Statement for the Record by Pamela Roberts,  
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**Congress must extend deadline for Liberian citizenship program amid COVID-19 and USCIS’ botched implementation**

For thousands of Liberians who fled war in their home country and have been living in the United States for decades, the passage of Liberian Refugee Immigration Fairness (LRIF) in the 2020 National Defense Authorization Act last December established a roadmap to citizenship and, at long last, a chance for security and stability in their adopted country. For years, Liberians have lived lawfully in the U.S., working, paying taxes, marrying, raising children, developing friendships, and supporting each other in faith communities, but always with a shadow hanging over them. They knew their temporary welcome here could end at any time, tearing them away from their lives, their livelihoods, and their loved ones, deported to a country that is no longer home to them.

As a Pennsylvania-based attorney serving sixteen individuals and families applying for the LRIF program, I’ve heard their stories firsthand. My clients include a young man eager to earn his engineering degree and another who has started his own business; a pastor of a vibrant community church; social workers; community leaders; and essential workers who care for the sick, package food, and fill orders for online shopping.

When Congress came together on a bipartisan basis last December, they recognized the need to stabilize the Liberian community members who have called the United States home for so long. Accordingly, they called the law Liberian Refugee Immigration *Fairness*, because that’s what this is about. Fairness: a chance to live with the security every person deserves.

But nearly halfway through the short one-year window provided to Liberians to apply for the program, there is serious concern that the opportunity and promise of the LRIF program cannot be fulfilled, due to circumstances beyond the control of the applicants. A new report by the Catholic Legal Immigration Network-led Temporary Protected Status Working Group and African Communities Together concludes that only about 1,200 of the potentially 10,000 eligible individuals had applied, and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) had not yet finished processing a single case. Applying for immigration benefits is always a confusing, time-consuming, labor-intensive, and emotionally exhausting process that requires massive amounts of paperwork. However, a botched rollout by USCIS and the unprecedented challenges of COVID-19 have drastically exacerbated these challenges and are likely to leave the Liberian community slipping through the cracks yet again.

It is no secret that USCIS mismanagement has repeatedly placed obstacles in the way of applicants lawfully seeking to benefit from immigration opportunities. LRIF applicants are no exception. Although the program was approved in December 2019 and allowed those eligible only one year to apply, USCIS delayed releasing guidance for months. Then, the guidance demanded that applicants produce unnecessary, burdensome documentation, and imposed conditions that are more restrictive than the statutory program requires. Additionally, rather than efficiently channeling all LRIF cases to a single location where well-trained adjudicators could quickly process cases, as they do with many other benefits, USCIS decided to disperse LRIF applications to various offices around the country.

In addition to these challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented incredible logistical problems to helping clients prepare their applications. Every part of the process simply takes longer and is more complicated. This starts with the difficulty of building trust with a client you cannot meet face to face; to reviewing documents remotely; making “no touch” transfers of critically important original documents in public outdoor spaces; to printing, copying, and scanning hundreds of pages on your home printer.

My struggles in providing legal services are compounded by the true horrors of this pandemic. One of my clients had COVID-19 herself and was gravely ill. Another was unable to say goodbye to a brother who, while stranded during a visit to Liberia, contracted the virus and died. Many of my clients are essential workers, including home health aides. One was quarantined with her patient for 24 hours a day for 10 weeks straight. Another is working around-the-clock at Amazon, packaging items that others are afraid to go out and buy in person. Gathering documents and applying for immigration benefits is incredibly difficult under normal circumstances. How can people facing these heartbreaking, life-altering events while working on the frontlines of COVID-19 be reasonably expected to put together tons of paperwork and deal with a complicated legal process? Given these circumstances, the deadline of December 2020 is simply unrealistic.

A client recently told me that his niece “has not stopped smiling” since she put her documents in the mail to me to work on her case because, for the first time ever, she has hope that she can stay in the United States and become an American citizen. Congress must extend the deadline to apply for the program by at least another year, just as other deadlines have been extended due to the pandemic, and must hold USCIS accountable to manage the program efficiently. We simply need more time to fulfill the promise Congress made in the Liberian Refugee Immigration Fairness program.