

Fraud plagues Biden 'parole' program: Michelle Obama's passport used; dead people named sponsors



People, including many Haitians, leave Mexico to cross into the United States for their appointment with officials to seek asylum, Wednesday, March 13, 2024, seen from Tijuana, Mexico. Gang violence wracking Haiti has reverberated among millions who left Haiti for ... People, including many Haitians, leave Mexico ... more >

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By Stephen Dinan
The Washington Times
Monday, September 9, 2024

Gang members and scammers using dead people's names were applying to be sponsors for President Biden's fraud-riddled immigration "parole" program that has welcomed hundreds of thousands of migrants from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela, The Washington Times has learned.

The program was also starved of staffing, leaving it unable to track down all the fraud, according to the government's internal audit, which said the program was "well-intentioned" but became a means for fraudsters to "victimize" the migrants and steal Americans' identities.

In one case, someone filed an application using the passport number of former first lady Michelle Obama.

The program allows migrants from Ukraine, Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela to enter the U.S. without a legal visa. It requires them to have a U.S.-based sponsor to promise financial support.

The process for approving sponsors was riddled with loopholes and snafus that made fraud easy to perpetrate and tough to spot, according to a 23-page internal audit by Michael Mayhew, head of the Immigration Records and Identity Services division at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

"Since there is little to no barrier to entry to file ... there is a lot of fraud, exploitation, and duplicative filings that have occurred," Mr. Mayhew said in the audit.

According to markings on the document seen by The Times, the audit was to be shared only among the agency's senior leaders.

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Mr. Mayhew made 40 recommendations for changes to prevent the fraud.

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Biden officials paused the program in the wake of Mr. Mayhew's findings, but USCIS insisted it had fixed the problems and restarted it late last month. The agency adopted some of Mr. Mayhew's recommended changes but not all of them.

“Together with our existing rigorous vetting of potential beneficiaries seeking to travel to the United States, these new procedures for supporters have strengthened the integrity of these processes and will help protect against exploitation of beneficiaries,” the Department of Homeland Security said in a statement.

Emilio Gonzalez, who ran USCIS during the Bush administration, said the Biden team was trying to fix a political program more than it wanted to fix the fraud in the program.

“This administration is more interested in putting people through than it is in vetting for the correct individuals,” Mr. Gonzalez said. “Their vocabulary never uses the word ‘stop.’ It’s always ‘process,’ ‘transport,’ ‘house,’ ‘educate,’ ‘bring them through.’ They want to get as many people through the door as possible and then deal with the consequences once they’re on this side of the border.”

He and other former senior agency leaders with whom The Times shared portions of the internal report said it described a program doomed to failure.

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“Oh, that’s really bad,” said Ken Cuccinelli, who served as head of USCIS and acting homeland security deputy secretary in the Trump administration.

“That is an extraordinarily frank summary of an incredibly difficult set of problems, and all at a time when the Venezuelans seem to be being weaponized by their own government against our country and many of our cities,” he said.

The program began with Ukrainians fleeing their home country after Russia's 2022 invasion. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas figured the best way to keep them from joining the surge at the deteriorating U.S.-Mexico border was to create a program outside the usual legal channels

that would let them into the country with an iffy legal status of “parole.”

Later in 2022, as Venezuelan migrants began to swamp the southern U.S. border, Mr. Mayorkas expanded the program to include them. In early 2023, he added Cubans, Haitians and Nicaraguans. That gave the program the moniker used in government circles, CHNV.

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Mr. Mayorkas’ innovation for Ukraine and CHNV was to require migrants to have a U.S.-based sponsor who vows to support them financially, saving them from becoming burdens on the American taxpayer, before they arrive.

USCIS was tasked with vetting those financial sponsors.

Customs and Border Protection, which staffs the country’s airports, was tasked with the final admission of the migrants.

Homeland Security says CBP’s vetting should keep dangerous migrants out of the U.S.

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The internal USCIS report indicated that problems with the sponsors’ applications emerged early, so it’s not clear why it took so long for the Biden administration to hit pause.

Indeed, the Ukrainian part of the program was never shut down despite being “riddled with fraud,” according to one government source.

The Times has learned that employees at USCIS were raising concerns early on but were ignored until agency leaders were told that dead people and Venezuelan gang members were applying to be sponsors.

Among the issues Mr. Mayhew identified were:

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- People selling sponsorships on social media to migrants with whom they had no connection. That included applications filed in the names of legitimate U.S. citizens whose identities were stolen — including Mrs. Obama.

- Nearly 1,000 applications approved with Social Security numbers of dead people.
- Thousands of applications with bogus addresses.
- Badly designed systems and not enough staffing — and those who are working cases aren't trained to spot fraud.

One source said the White House didn't want stiffer checks on the sponsors because it didn't want to "disincentivize" people from signing up.

Migrants quickly figured out the holes to exploit.

Mr. Mayhew said reviewers were surprised when they saw Haitians submitting applications claiming to be Ukrainian. Venezuelans and Cubans then followed suit. He said they figured out that while they were all part of the 30,000-per-month cap, there was no cap on Ukrainians.

"This is becoming very problematic for the reviewers as the ones processing the Ukraine queue are not realizing the scheme, and confirming a Cuban, Haitian and/or Venezuelan beneficiary that was marked as a Ukrainian," Mr. Mayhew said.

USCIS has made a point of avoiding the use of trained adjudicators for the program. Those handling the cases are called "reviewers."

Mr. Mayhew suggested that was a mistake.

"Experience has taught us that detailees with adjudications experience are the most productive detailees participating in Form I-134A processing and have the necessary training and system access to produce quality work," he wrote.

As it was, the program has proved wildly popular.

Some 2.7 million applications had been submitted as of July, and the 2 million case backlog amounted to more than five years of work. Applications were streaming in at a rate of 90,000 a month, or three times the 30,000 cap USCIS set for approvals, Mr. Mayhew said.

Demand has been so great that some scammers began to sell financial sponsorships.

For \$5,000, someone in Nicaragua can pay to have a support application filed on their behalf without communicating with the sponsors themselves, The Times has reported.

USCIS has cautioned would-be migrants to be wary of scams but does not prohibit the sale of sponsorships.

Any entity in the U.S. with some form of status can be a sponsor — including those who just arrived under the CHNV program or illegal immigrants in the country under a grant of Temporary Protected Status.

Homeland Security reopened the program late in August, asserting that it had made enough changes to reduce fraud.

“The enhanced vetting measures include, but are not limited to: further scrutiny of supporters’ financial records and criminal background, additional vetting to identify fraudulent supporter profiles, and bolstered review methods to identify serial filing trends,” the department said in a statement to The Times.

One major change is to require applicants to provide fingerprints. The hope is that will scare fraudulent applicants and dangerous figures from applying in the first place, The Times has been told.

Mr. Mayhew’s audit said USCIS has also updated its systems to require a criminal records check every 180 days. Given the backlog, the danger was that applications were lingering and applicants could have amassed criminal records between the time they filed and they were reviewed.

Some of Mr. Mayhew’s other recommendations have not been adopted.

His internal review recommended that USCIS charge a fee for filing and processing. The audit said the applicants must be financially able to support a migrant, so a nominal fee isn’t a burden — but it would weed out bogus cases and prevent instances of the same person filing dozens of cases.

Mr. Gonzalez said USCIS rushed the restart because of pressure from Mexico, where tens of thousands of migrants are massed in camps waiting for a chance to cross into the U.S.

“The Mexicans are basically telling the U.S. government, ‘You either do something, or we’re going to let these people go,’” Mr. Gonzalez said. “There is an unserious sense of urgency to restart this program when serious flaws still exist.”

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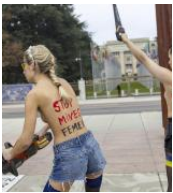
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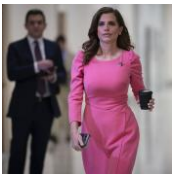
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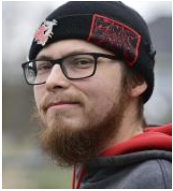
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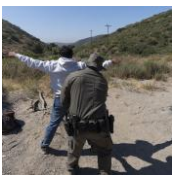


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