



TESTIMONY OF

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BEFORE

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Judiciary**

U.S. House of Representatives

ON

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Chairman McClintock, Ranking Member Jayapal, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the critical work of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. USCIS is an agency that Congress created in 2002 under the Homeland Security Act to administer the lawful immigration system in the United States. Our role as directed by Congress is to adjudicate applications and requests for immigration services in a fair, accurate and timely manner, while preserving the integrity and security of our immigration system. Our tremendously dedicated workforce of more than 22,500 work tirelessly every day to carry out our important mission. As our workload continues to grow, our staff are always ready to roll up their sleeves and act with professionalism, integrity, and compassion.

I am incredibly proud of how far we have come since I joined USCIS as Director in August 2021. In 2020, in the midst of COVID, our agency was rocked by a fiscal crisis which resulted in a hiring freeze, the termination of critical support contracts, and the issuance of furlough notices to 70 percent of our federal workforce. These drastic cuts led to the worst backlog in USCIS history. While we ultimately avoided moving forward with furloughs, the challenges took a significant toll on workforce morale, and our backlog reached an all-time high.

However, the people of USCIS are resilient. They are innovative. They respond with excellence when faced with challenges. I have seen it time and time again. It is because of this that, today, USCIS has stabilized its fiscal health and management, increased hiring to fill critical roles across the agency, improved employee morale, promoted efficiency and integrity in adjudications, delivered on our humanitarian mission, and strengthened public engagement while improving customer service. Moreover, with the help of Congress and investments in our people, processes, and technology, our backlog has decreased for the first time in a decade. These efforts have positioned us to better serve the public and ensure that USCIS can continue to operate effectively in the years to come.

Our work represents much more than adjudications, policies, and regulations. For many immigrants, USCIS is the beginning of their American story. These immigrants are doctors, nurses, lawyers, and members of the U.S. Armed Forces. They serve as the backbone of our economy as laborers, caretakers, chefs, transportation workers, and high-tech workers, among many others. And they fill critical gaps in our workforce that would otherwise go unfilled. The work that we do is more than just a public service to me; it's also personal. My own parents' immigration stories began like this, my dad from Iraq and my mom from Mexico. Their love and devotion to each other, our family, and our great nation led me to my current role.

At USCIS we know that behind every eligible immigration application is a person, a dream, a family building a life together, an opportunity for economic growth—the future of our nation. I am honored to serve alongside our federal employees and contractors who—in more than 200 USCIS offices at home and abroad—strive every day to accomplish our mission.

My mission every day has been and continues to be upholding America's promise as a nation of welcome and possibility with fairness, integrity, and respect for all we serve. I strive to make USCIS more effective. At my confirmation hearing in 2021, I affirmed my commitment to the

American people. And today, I am pleased to provide this Committee with an update on what we have accomplished.

Strengthening USCIS Fiscal Health and Management

Strengthening the fiscal health of USCIS has been and continues to be my top priority as Director. Unlike most federal agencies, USCIS relies on the fees we collect from applicants for approximately 96 percent of our funding, with only 4 percent coming from congressional appropriations. Ensuring we are properly resourced, projecting costs and income for today and tomorrow, and making critical investments in our team and priorities is always top of mind. This year, we finalized the agency's new fee rule, which took effect on April 1, 2024, and marks the first fee adjustment since 2016. The rule is the cornerstone of our fiscal health and overall operational strategy because it enables us to better recover our operating costs and support timely and secure processing of new applications. The new fee schedule will be directed at our current and projected workloads and will allow us to strengthen our workforce, and develop and implement innovative solutions that improve efficiency, integrity, and customer experience.

While the new fee rule will generate much needed funding to keep pace with incoming workloads, I want to emphasize that continued congressional funding is the only way we will be able to fully and meaningfully address the full scope of the work of our statutory mission to administer the nation's lawful immigration system.

We are grateful for the support we have received from Congress over the past few years. It has been crucial in helping us make progress. Specifically, the \$68.7 million in the FY 2024 DHS Appropriations Act for backlog reduction has been vital in our efforts to reduce pending workloads and invest in technology to create efficiencies.

Increased Hiring and Improved Employee Morale

Hiring and rebuilding employee morale is another focal point. Due to the dire financial situation in 2020 that resulted in a potential furlough and a hiring freeze that lasted almost a year, our workforce fell below 19,000 employees. Since then, our collective efforts to prioritize hiring and rebuild employee morale have paid off: we are now 22,500 employees strong, more than at any other time in our history.

Innovative hiring strategies have been at the center of our growth. We created additional entry-level positions for mission-critical roles, allowing USCIS to recruit talented individuals earlier in their careers, with a goal of training and providing long-term development opportunities to ensure they continue to build their futures with USCIS. We held 16 USCIS-centric Career Fairs across the nation to recruit new talent and utilized direct hiring authority and other tools aimed at meeting critical position needs to decrease our overall hiring timelines. Our newest team members come to USCIS with a diverse range of experiences and talents from both the public and private sectors—as recent graduates, veterans, attorneys, and technologists. We are very proud to count 30 percent of our workforce as veterans.

We are equally committed to fostering an environment that encourages open communication between employees and management. Since joining the agency, I have led numerous initiatives to ensure the voices of our workforce are heard and their efforts are recognized. We have held nine all-employee town halls across the country, each drawing over 10,000 virtual participants and featuring nearly 300 employee questions; hosted three annual award ceremonies to honor the outstanding contributions and exemplary work of more than 200 individuals and teams; and actively encouraged direct feedback from employees through the “Ask the Director” virtual Suggestion Box, which encourages employees to provide ongoing, direct feedback about the state of USCIS.

Our success could not be clearer—the 2024 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey results for USCIS show an all-time high of 79 percent positivity on the employee engagement index, two points higher than in 2023 and six points above the government-wide average. What is even more encouraging is that our 2024 results show improvement across all core areas, from leadership and supervision to performance, recognition, and accountability.

Promoted Efficiency in USCIS Adjudications While Ensuring Integrity

My third priority has been to promote efficiency in adjudications while maintaining our commitment to ensuring integrity in the immigration programs we administer. USCIS has experienced year-over-year increases in filings – from 9 million filings in FY 2021 and FY 2022, to 10.9 million in FY 2023, to well over 13 million in FY 2024. We have implemented a myriad of process improvements to meet this challenge, and those efforts are already yielding impressive results. In FY 2023, USCIS completed more than 10 million cases and reduced overall agency backlogs by 15 percent – reducing its pending workload for the first time in over a decade, even in the face of a record number of filings. In FY 2024, USCIS continued FY 2023 trends and decreased the backlog by 11.2 percent despite a 23.4 percent increase in receipts in FY 2023. We also increased our case completions by 21.7 percent representing a record high of 13.2 million completions in FY 2024.

Although much work remains to deliver timely decisions, USCIS has made incredible progress in efficiently adjudicating cases and reducing the amount of time individuals wait for decisions on their applications, petitions, and requests. USCIS has taken proactive steps to strengthen and enhance the integrity of our adjudicative outcomes through expansion of screening and vetting processes including for example, full integration of USRAP and affirmative asylum applications within the National Vetting Center (NVC). Additionally, to further fulfill USCIS’ national security and public safety missions most effectively, USCIS has begun implementing policies on the use of classified information for our adjudicative processes, consistent with the May 9, 2024, DHS memorandum entitled *DHS Policy and Guidelines for the Use of Classified Information in Immigration Proceedings*.

We have eliminated the backlog of naturalization applications. For the third year running, together with the Department of State, we ensured that no available employment-based immigrant visas were wasted in FY 2024. Our median processing time for employment authorization documents reduced nearly in half, from 2.1 months in FY 2023 to just over one

month in FY 2024, meaning those eligible for employment authorization can more quickly get to work for U.S. employers and contribute to the nation's economy.

Beyond program efficiency, I have also focused on integrity. Last year, we proposed a rule to modernize the H-2 temporary worker visa program clarifying the scope and consequences of on-site inspections and closing loopholes that have otherwise allowed petitioners to avoid liability for prohibited fees. The rule also proposed new grounds for denial of petitions filed by employers who committed labor law violations or abused the H-2 programs. Likewise, we published a final rule strengthening the integrity and reducing potential fraud in the H-1B registration process by ensuring each beneficiary would have the same chance to being selected, regardless of the number of registrations submitted on their behalf. This reduced the number of registrations by almost 290,000, and greatly increased the chances for legitimate beneficiaries to be selected.

Fulfilling Our Humanitarian Mission

We have also made progress in meeting the extraordinary demands on our humanitarian programs while simultaneously improving our screening and vetting processes to ensure the integrity of our immigration processes. Since 2021, we have rebuilt, modernized, and strengthened the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), resulting in the thorough screening, vetting, admission, and resettlement of over 100,000 refugees in FY 2024 in the United States. America is once again a global leader in third-country refugee resettlement. This success is the result of the collective work of the Departments of State; Health and Human Services; and Homeland Security, as well as our international governmental and nongovernmental partners. In FY 2024, USCIS refugee officers participated in 107 circuit rides to 69 countries and interviewed over 165,000 refugee applicants – a more than 68 percent increase since FY 2023.

Also in FY 2024, USCIS completed more than 125,000 affirmative asylum cases; this included prioritizing processing of asylum cases for Afghan allies and their families as mandated by Congress. We also completed over 216,000 credible fear and reasonable fear screenings of individuals expressing a fear of return after being encountered at the border, breaking the prior year's record of 146,000, an approximately 48 percent increase.

Along with these adjudicative accomplishments in the refugee and asylum programs, we have expanded the already robust screening and vetting by integrating these programs into the National Vetting Center (NVC). In March 2022, the existing classified refugee vetting process was integrated into the NVC, expanding the breadth of information available to ensure adjudicative decisions take into account all relevant classified material. In February 2024, we deployed a similar NVC check for all affirmative asylum applicants, expanding existing vetting and introducing continuous vetting against relevant national security related holdings to facilitate immediate notification if an applicant poses a national security risk.

We have also implemented additional unclassified mechanisms to enhance the integrity of our refugee and asylum programs. Our Fraud Detection and National Security teams review certain categories of cases based on risk to ensure higher risk cases are reviewed for potential fraud,

national security, and public safety issues and to ensure any such issues are highlighted for the adjudicator prior to interview. Additionally, we have embedded Fraud Detection and National Security staff with our ICE Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) partners at several facilities along the southwest border to enhance collaboration and information sharing related to fraud, national security, and public safety risks in the credible and reasonable fear caseload.

We continue to carry out our role in implementing the Administration's and the Department's strategy to disincentivize irregular migration and expand the availability of safe, orderly, and lawful pathways and processes to the United States. We continue to grow our asylum officer workforce to more effectively administer regulations governing credible fear assessments, including the Circumvention of Lawful Pathways and Securing the Border rules. We have implemented Operation Allies Welcome to support Afghans, including those who worked alongside American troops in Afghanistan, as they safely resettle in the United States. In collaboration with the intelligence community, we are also delivering needed essential immigration benefits to vulnerable Afghans who worked in concert with the U.S. government, reinforcing our commitment to protecting those who stood with us. We also implemented Uniting for Ukraine, a process to provide Ukrainian citizens who have fled Russia's unprovoked war of aggression.

In addition, we partner with our colleagues at U.S. Customs and Border Protection to administer the parole processes for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans and have put in place several measures to strengthen the integrity of these processes and enhance our vetting of U.S.-based supporters, in addition to the applicants themselves. We have successfully collaborated with partners across DHS including DHS Policy, ICE, DHS Intelligence and Analysis, and CBP to implement rigorous and appropriate screening and vetting of applications for immigration benefits, and have adjusted that screening and vetting when warranted. We have developed similar partnerships across the U.S. Government including both the Department of State and members of the intelligence community. We have leveraged these partnerships to shape and inform our adjudicative decisions, consistent with law and policy, while also engaging in legal and appropriate information sharing with these entities to support their lawful missions.

Strengthened Public Engagement and Improved Customer Service

Finally, I am incredibly proud of the work we do to improve the experience of interacting with USCIS to ensure that we are a responsive, transparent, and trustworthy agency. USCIS is committed to implementing smart, sensible, and meaningful ways to resolve the most inefficient and burdensome processes for those who interact with us – from U.S. citizens and U.S. employers to those seeking humanitarian assistance. One of the ways we do that is by communicating with the people and communities we serve, to improve their access to us and our delivery of services to them. I am proud to say that in FY 2024, USCIS held 2,314 stakeholder engagements, with a combined reach of 139,235 total participants.

Today, the UCSIS toll-free customer service line is at a 5-minute average wait time for callers, down from 22 minutes in the first half of FY 2022. For those who require a callback from USCIS, we launched a new Text Ahead feature that allows USCIS to text individuals 30 minutes

to one hour before a call from the USCIS Contact Center. Meeting people where they are is critical to our customer experience work.

USCIS continues to expand online filing, recognizing the growing need to improve the online experience. In February 2024, ahead of our annual H-1B cap season, USCIS—for the first time—provided a fully digital experience for employers and their attorneys while revamping the H-1B registration system through the issuance of new rules to ensure that bad actors cannot game the system.

In October 2024, we launched the first phase of PDF intake, an online filing experience that mirrors filing a paper application and eliminates mail and paper applications with the intake of PDFs through an authenticated online account.

We also improved our ability to communicate and collect the data we need to securely process cases. We added an online tool to easily allow those we serve to change their address, ensuring that we send our communications to the correct location. This has proved incredibly popular, with more than 1.7 million people using it since its launch in October 2023. We also added the online ability to reschedule biometrics appointments to avoid delays in processing. This allows for a more efficient process.

Though we still have more to do to ensure that people who need to connect with us can do so in an accessible manner, we have heavily invested in and improved our public engagement and customer service.

Conclusion

USCIS has made incredible progress in achieving a vision of a healthy and functioning lawful immigration system. At my confirmation hearing, I committed to providing the dedicated team at USCIS with the resources, support, and leadership necessary to carry out our mission with excellence. And I committed to ensuring that USCIS retains the confidence of the American public. I am so proud to be a part of this incredible workforce striving to make USCIS the best it can be.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to be here today. I look forward to answering your questions.