



**Statement for the Record**

**U.S. House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary**

**Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship**

**Hearing on**

**“Policy Changes and Processing Delays at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services”**

**July 16, 2019**

The National Immigration Forum (the Forum) advocates for the value of immigrants and immigration to the nation. Founded in 1982, the Forum plays a leading role in the national debate about immigration, knitting together innovative alliances across diverse faith, law enforcement, veterans, and business constituencies in communities across the country. Coming together under the Forum’s leadership, these alliances develop and advocate for legislative and administrative policy positions. Through our policy expertise and work with diverse constituencies, the Forum works to uphold America’s long-standing tradition as a nation of immigrants and build public support for comprehensive immigration reform, sound border security policies, balanced enforcement of immigration laws, and ensuring that new Americans have the opportunities, skills and status to reach their full potential.

**Introduction**

The National Immigration Forum thanks the Subcommittee for the opportunity to provide its views on the matter of policy changes and processing delays at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). The Forum is concerned that the processing backlog at USCIS continues to delay citizenship applications for hundreds of thousands of people. USCIS’s mission statement is, in part, to “efficiently and fairly adjudicate[e] requests for immigration benefits.”<sup>i</sup> We believe USCIS can better meet this standard by hiring additional staffers and assigning them to process citizenship applications. A more efficient naturalization process is important to maintain the agency’s consumer-friendly standard and for America’s long-term economic and civic health.

**America’s Naturalization Backlog Continues**

USCIS, the agency responsible for processing the N-400 Application for Naturalization, continues to face a significant backlog in processing citizenship applications. USCIS received approximately 833,200 citizenship applications from lawful permanent residents (LPRs) in fiscal year (FY) 2018 and 388,000 in the first six months of FY 2019. Of these, individuals who are serving or served in the military submitted almost 3,000 applications in FY 2018 and 1,380 in the first six months of FY 2019.<sup>ii</sup>

As a result of this intake, the number of citizenship applications pending adjudication reached 714,000 by the end of the first six months of FY 2019. This backlog represents a 37 percent increase from about 522,000 pending applications at the end of FY 2016 and only a 3 percent decrease from about 738,000 pending applications at the end of FY 2018.<sup>iii</sup>

The citizenship backlog is particularly severe in certain communities. Average processing times in some USCIS field offices reached 10.2 months in FY 2018, compared to the national average in 2016 that was about 5.6 months.<sup>iv</sup> In Houston, the processing time for a citizenship application in July 2019 ranged from 14 to 21.5 months, about triple the state average in 2016, which ranged from five to six months.<sup>v</sup> The processing time for citizenship applications in Phoenix, Arizona currently ranges from 14.5 to 20.5 months. In Denver, the processing time for naturalization ranges from 9.5 to 21 months.<sup>vi</sup>

The USCIS Ombudsman's office, which is an independent entity in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), noted that prolonged processing times affects the ability of LPRs to "reunite with families, progress in their careers, and fully integrate into the community with all the rights and responsibilities of an American citizen."<sup>vii</sup> We agree with this assessment. USCIS committed in 2007 to reduce the processing time for citizenship applications to an average of five months. USCIS has more work to do to fully reduce the citizenship backlog and meet its decades-long processing goal.<sup>viii</sup>

### **USCIS Failed to Prepare for Spikes in Citizenship Applications**

USCIS currently faces a significant naturalization backlog in part because the agency failed to account for the expected election-year spike in citizenship applications in FY 2016. Historical data indicates that the number of citizenship applications submitted to USCIS generally increases in an election year.<sup>ix</sup> Despite the fact that FY 2016 was an election year, USCIS projected at the time it would receive only 775,000 citizenship applications, below the number it received in FY 2015 (783,062 applications) and nearly 200,000 less than the actual number received in FY 2016 (971,242 applications). In addition, USCIS also miscalculated its projections for FY 2017. USCIS projected it would receive 853,000 citizenship applications in FY 2017 but received more than 130,000 additional applications than it anticipated (986,851 applications).<sup>x</sup>

USCIS's incorrect projections meant that the agency failed to prepare adequately for what should have been an expected spike in citizenship applications. The agency failed to assign or hire sufficient staffers to process citizenship applications. As the number of citizenship applications submitted to USCIS increased in FYs 2016 and 2017, the naturalization backlog worsened.

### **America Benefits from Naturalization**

America's economic and civic health benefits from efficient and timely processing of naturalization applications, because naturalization provides significant economic benefits to the nation and helps immigrant reach their full potential and contribute fully to their local communities. One study found that the United States gross domestic product (GDP) would increase between \$37 billion to \$52 billion over 10 years if the eligible-to-naturalize population in the United States obtained U.S. citizenship.<sup>xi</sup> Naturalized immigrants also tend to have better economic outcomes than their nonnaturalized counterparts, in part because naturalization provides them with access to better paying jobs by signaling command of the English language and commitment to remain in the U.S. in the long term.<sup>xii</sup> Making the naturalization process more efficient would go a long way in strengthening America's economic and civic health.

## USCIS Must Hire and Assign Staff to Decrease the Backlog

The Trump administration has an opportunity to reduce the naturalization backlog by ensuring USCIS hires additional staffers and assigns them to process citizenship applications. USCIS recently stated it plans to hire 737 new employees in FY 2019, a five percent increase, to conduct adjudications.<sup>xiii</sup> However, it is unclear whether USCIS plans to assign most, if any, of these new district operations staffers to process naturalization applications and whether assigning the entire 737 new staffers is enough to reduce the naturalization backlog to an average processing time of five months.

At the same time, the Forum is concerned that these 737 new staffers will, for the most part, be assigned to help implement new USCIS policies that contribute to increased processing times. USCIS issued a new policy on August 28, 2017 to require in-person interviews for employment-based green card applications and for relatives of refugees and asylees. This shift in policy exacerbated USCIS's processing delays by taking resources away from processing applications to focus on in-person interviews. USCIS acknowledged in February 2019 that the additional time required for interviews is reducing the overall number of application completions per hour, thereby contributing to increased agency backlogs.<sup>xiv</sup> Hiring additional staffers to help implement policies that contribute to processing delays will not help reduce the naturalization backlog.

USCIS must focus on hiring and assigning additional staffers to help process naturalization applications specifically. Additional staffers would help USCIS process naturalization applications in a more efficient manner and go a long way in reducing the naturalization backlog to five months, as USCIS committed to doing more than ten years ago.

## Conclusion

The Forum thanks the Subcommittee for holding this hearing and considering policies to help reduce USCIS processing delays, including the naturalization backlog. The naturalization backlog is preventing America's economic and civic health from fully benefiting from the naturalization of the country's eligible-to-naturalize population. USCIS must work to reduce the naturalization backlog by hiring and assigning additional staffers to process citizenship applications. While USCIS announced plans to hire additional employees, we are concerned that few, if any, of these employees will be assigned to process naturalization forms. We encourage Congress to continue its oversight role to ensure USCIS assigns new staffers to process naturalization applications, in order to allow applicants for naturalization and our country to benefit from a more efficient process.

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<sup>i</sup> "About Us," U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) (March 6, 2018):

<https://www.uscis.gov/aboutus>.

<sup>ii</sup> "Immigration and Citizenship Data," U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) (Last Retrieved: July 15, 2019): <https://www.uscis.gov/tools/reports-studies/immigration-forms-data>.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iv</sup> Armus, Teo, "Under Trump, There's a Growing Wait to Become a U.S. Citizen," *Washington Post* (August 17, 2018): [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/immigration/under-trump-a-growing-wait-to-become-a-us-citizen/2018/08/16/ed364786-9bec-11e8-843b-36e177f3081c\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.47876bb31cd3](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/immigration/under-trump-a-growing-wait-to-become-a-us-citizen/2018/08/16/ed364786-9bec-11e8-843b-36e177f3081c_story.html?utm_term=.47876bb31cd3).

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- v “Immigration and Citizenship Data,” USCIS; Ura, Alexa, “Under Trump, the Backlog of U.S. Citizenship Applications in Texas is Growing,” *Texas Tribune* (August 9, 2018): <https://www.texastribune.org/2018/08/09/trump-texas-backlog-citizenship-naturalization-applications/>.
- vi “Processing Times-USCIS Case Status,” U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) (Last Retrieved: July 12, 2019): <https://egov.uscis.gov/processing-times/>.
- vii “Annual Report 2016,” U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Ombudsman (June 29, 2016), 66-67: <https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/DHS%20Annual%20Report%202016.pdf>
- viii “USCIS will continue to shift resources to ensure that all local offices achieve the goal of five month processing times.” “USCIS Updates Projected Naturalization Processing Times,” U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) (August 11, 2008): <https://www.uscis.gov/archive/archive-news/uscis-updates-projected-naturalization-processing-times>.
- ix Blizzard, Brittany and Jeanne Batalova, “Naturalization Trends in the United States,” Migration Policy Institute (July 11, 2019): <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/naturalization-trends-united-states>.
- x “Annual Report 2017,” U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Ombudsman (June 29, 2017), 10-12: [https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/DHS%20Annual%20Report%202017\\_o.pdf](https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/DHS%20Annual%20Report%202017_o.pdf); “U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Budget Overview Fiscal Year 2018 Congressional Justification,” Department of Homeland Security (DHS) (2018): 24, <https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/USCIS%20FY18%20Budget.pdf>.
- xi Pastor, Manuel and Justin Scoggins, “Citizen Gain: The Economic Benefits of Naturalization for Immigrants and the Economy,” Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration’s (CSII) (December 2012): [https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/731/docs/citizen\\_gain\\_web.pdf](https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/731/docs/citizen_gain_web.pdf).
- xii “The Road to Naturalization: Addressing the Barriers to U.S. Citizenship,” National Immigration Forum (September 2016): <http://immigrationforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/The-Road-to-Naturalization.pdf>.
- xiii “Processing Delays in Nevada – Senator Cortez Masto,” Electronic Reading Room, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), 2: [https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/files/natedocuments/Processing\\_delays\\_in\\_Nevada\\_-\\_Senator\\_Cortez\\_Masto.pdf](https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/files/natedocuments/Processing_delays_in_Nevada_-_Senator_Cortez_Masto.pdf).
- xiv “Processing Delays - Representative Garcia,” Electronic Reading Room, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), 2-3: [https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/files/natedocuments/Processing\\_Delays\\_-\\_Representative\\_Garcia.pdf](https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/files/natedocuments/Processing_Delays_-_Representative_Garcia.pdf).