
Statement for the Record on Policy Changes and Processing Delays at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

Submitted to

Immigration and Citizenship Subcommittee

Submitted by

UnidosUS and the National Partnership for New Americans

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UnidosUS, formerly the National Council of La Raza, is the largest national Latino civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States. For more than 50 years, UnidosUS has worked to advance opportunities for Latino families to enhance their significant contributions to the social, economic and political tapestry of our great nation. In this capacity, UnidosUS and its Affiliate network of nearly 300 community-based organizations in 36 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, work to provide education, health care, immigration, housing, workforce development, and other services to millions of Latinos in the United States each year. More than 40 UnidosUS Affiliates are recognized by the Department of Justice to provide immigration legal services, including assistance in completing naturalization applications, and more than 50 offer English and civics classes to prepare eligible permanent residents to successfully become U.S. citizens.

The National Partnership for New Americans (NPNA) represents the collective power and resources of the country's 37 largest regional immigrant and refugee rights organizations in 35 states. NPNA's *Family Protection Network*, comprised of 29 Department of Justice (DOJ) recognized organizations and 150 attorneys and legal staff across the nation, served more than 320,000 immigrants and refugees last year with know-you-rights trainings, DACA and naturalization application assistance and deportation defense. NPNA members combine service delivery with sophisticated organizing tactics to advance local, state and federal policy. We believe America's success is rooted in our ongoing commitment to welcoming and integrating newcomers into the fabric of our nation, and to upholding equality and opportunity as fundamental American values.

UnidosUS and NPNA have a long history of motivating eligible permanent residents to naturalize by working with community-based organizations, elected officials, and the media. In July 2018, NPNA along with UnidosUS and a broad coalition launched the Campaign to Tear Down the Second Wall, which aims to tear down the "second wall" of more than 713,000 citizenship applications currently backlogged by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), compel the agency to reduce the processing time for citizenship applications to six months or less and eliminate or reform other policies that limit access to citizenship.

This statement for the record focuses on the serious concerns UnidosUS and NPNA have about the "second wall" of growing obstacles to U.S. citizenship faced by aspiring Americans. There are nearly 9 million people eligible for citizenship in the United States and most of them have been here and contributing for decades (78 percent of the eligible to naturalize have lived in the United for more than ten years).¹ If all those eligible were to naturalize it would result in significant contributions to our economy. According to the Center for Immigrant Integration at the University of Southern California, becoming a citizen can boost individual earnings by 8 to 11 percent and lead to a potential \$21-45 billion increase in cumulative earnings over ten years that would lead to ripple effects across our economy when new Americans get better jobs, earn more, pay more in taxes, buy homes and start businesses.²

¹ Warren Robert, Don Kerwin, "The US Eligible-to-Naturalize Population: Detailed Social and Economic Characteristics," *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 2015 <https://cmsny.org/publications/jmhs-us-eligible-to-naturalize/>

² Pastor, Manuel and Justin Scoggins, "Citizen Gain: The Economic Benefits of Naturalization for Immigrants and the Economy," *University of Southern California*, 2012 <https://dornsife.usc.edu/csii/citizen-gain/>

Application Delays and Backlogs

Despite the clear benefits to the country of increased naturalization rates, USCIS is advancing policies and practices that restrict the path to citizenship. Although the number of naturalization applications submitted are declining, naturalization backlogs have doubled since 2015 to 713,689 pending applications and average application processing times have increased from 5-6 months to more than 10 months and even 20 and 30 months in some USCIS offices.³ Eligible permanent residents make a substantial effort to complete the naturalization application and pay the filing fee, so it is only reasonable to expect that USCIS should process these applications in a reasonable time. If USCIS does not act to reverse this trend, these delays will have a devastating impact on the ability of eligible permanent residents to take the oath of citizenship, register to vote and participate in our democracy and vote in elections.

To make matters worse, USCIS can't get its story straight about what is causing these delays. In various press articles in response to studies by NPNA and Boundless Immigration, the agency has implied that an "unprecedented" number of applications is one reason for the backlogs and growing processing times.

See:

[NY Times "Wait Times for Citizenship Have Doubled in the Last Two Years"](#)

[Washington Post "Immigrants Seeking Citizenship Face Longer Wait Times For Their Applications"](#)

And in this story in the Texas Tribune, ["Under Trump the Backlog of U.S. Citizenship Applications is Growing."](#) the agency claims that it is processing application efficiently.

But according to USCIS' own published data and in former Director Francis Cissna's response to a letter from [Rep. Jesús García on the application backlogs and delays](#), the agency claims that because receipts declined in FY 2018 (end of "Receipts" bullet on p. 1) it wasn't able to properly fill all the positions, train staff, or secure facilities to handle the workload ("Resources" and "Facilities" bullets starting on p. 1).

Some USCIS offices with the longest processing times – Texas, Nevada, Georgia, Florida, Minnesota, to name a few – appear to be in states that have been/are likely to be "battlegrounds" in the 2020 election. Yet we also see the Administration is doubling the number of H2B visas and processing them efficiently for the summer vacation season for resorts like Mar a Lago.⁴

³ "Democracy Strangled" NPNA Addendum to Issue Brief on "Second Wall" Barriers to Citizenship. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1sG0Q4vBu3-0_3iLnh1ycWVHWZtDQtEhx/view

⁴ "Trump Administration Nearly Doubles H2b Guest Visa Program, which brings many Mexican Workers," https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/04/06/trump-administration-nearly-doubles-h-b-guest-visa-program-which-brings-many-mexican-workers/?utm_term=.53ee748ae391 ["Trump Organization Seeking Visas for Dozens of Foreign Workers at Florida Clubs."](#)

Other Troubling Obstacles to Citizenship

UnidosUS and NPNA are also concerned that USCIS is considering a significant increase in the current application fee (\$725), as well as moving to restrict access to the citizenship application fee waiver and proposing changes to the application form and documentation requirements that will increase the burden to apply. USCIS has also made it harder for people with disabilities to seek accommodations when applying for citizenship and is investing significant resources in trying to strip those naturalized of citizenship.

- Naturalization is costly, getting more expensive and is becoming an exclusive privilege of the wealthy. There is a pending regulation that once implemented would limit access to the naturalization fee waiver by eliminating the receipt of a means-tested benefit to establish eligibility for it. This would impact an estimated 40 percent or more of applicants who without the waiver would not be able to afford citizenship.
- The naturalization application and process is growing increasingly cumbersome. The application (N-400) is already 20 pages long with an additional 18 pages of instructions—and per another USCIS draft rule, is poised to become longer and require more documentation of applicants. USCIS is also playing “gotcha” with those eligible for citizenship through its increased use of Requests for Evidence and referrals through Notices to Appear.
- USCIS has also issued policy guidance that will make it more difficult for people with disabilities to seek accommodations and open them up to accusations of fraud.
- The agency has dedicated an unprecedented amount of resources to de-naturalization, stripping Americans of citizenship, in some cases decades after they became citizens.
- USCIS’ biennial fee study currently underway will likely result in massive fee increases, some of which DHS wants to divert to enforcement.

Other changes include: closing international offices that adjudicate citizenship applications; making applicants travel to other USCIS field offices, potentially up to hundreds of miles and in a different state, for their interview; and introducing unnecessary and overbroad questions and documentation requirements to applicants who have successfully completed every stage of the naturalization process and are simply waiting to pledge allegiance to the United States at an oath ceremony and formally become citizens. The nomination of Ken Cuccinelli as acting director of USCIS, with his long history of anti-immigrant, anti-LGBTQ, and fringe political opinions, represents an escalation of “second wall” policies. Its particularly concerning that the appointment was made in what appears to be an intentional circumvention of the Federal Vacancies Reform Act, the separation of powers, and the Senate’s authority to confirm higher-level officials.

With the delays and backlogs in naturalization processing and other barriers to citizenship, it is clear that more and more people—especially those of limited means—will be prevented from attaining U.S. citizenship. This will disenfranchise those who want to fully participate in our democracy, hinder economic growth and deny our country the benefits of incorporating long-

time residents into the social and cultural fabric of our nation. Full and equal access to U.S. citizenship is vital to our shared prosperity and nation's future. We look forward to working with you to ensure that naturalization applications are adjudicated fairly and efficiently. Please contact Laura Vazquez at lvazquez@unidosus.org or Susan Collins at susan@partnershipfornewamericans.org if you have any questions raised by this statement.