



BACKGROUND

June 29, 2000

INS Customer Service Initiatives

As part of agency efforts to rebuild the naturalization system, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) began a complete overhaul of its service structure in FY 1997. The goal was and continues to be to build a world-class service agency that guarantees process integrity and is responsive to the needs of its customers. Accordingly, INS has implemented a number of customer service initiatives that benefit all immigration benefit applicants, and continues to plan future service improvements.

National Customer Service Center—Telephone Information Service

As of December 1999, INS provides nationwide live telephone assistance with a single toll-free number. By dialing **1-800-375-5283**, customers throughout the country can get consistent, accurate information on immigration benefits and services.

This centralized telephone information service, part of the INS **National Customer Service Center** (NCSC) initiative, helps customers avoid inconvenient, time-consuming visits to INS offices, and allows local offices to focus on and improve services that can only be provided locally. Currently, NCSC is receiving 30,000 to 50,000 calls per day.

The telephone service is available in English and Spanish across the United States, including Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. It features automated, self-service options 24-hours a day, seven days a week with connection to live assistance available Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.¹

The menu of automated options provides basic eligibility and how-to information, as well as the ability to order forms. Customers requiring more or other information are transferred to customer service representatives. More complex inquiries are then transferred to INS information officers.

Change of Address Call-In System for Naturalization Applicants

As of March 2000, naturalization applicants throughout the country can report a change of address by calling the single toll-free NCSC number—**1-800-375-5283**—instead of submitting the new address by writing the local INS office. This new call-in system helps ensure that naturalization applicants who move will continue to receive the important time-sensitive notices that affect the processing of their cases (e.g., fingerprinting appointments, interviews and oath ceremonies).

INS Web site www.ins.usdoj.gov

INS' Web site—*INS Online* www.ins.usdoj.gov—provides information to the public on INS activities, programs, services and procedures, and on-line access to INS forms, as well as extensive information on immigration and naturalization benefits and homepages for local INS offices. The number of users per weekday has doubled within the past year—from an average of 13,400 to more than 27,000 as of March 2000. Nearly 2.5 million INS forms have been downloaded from the site.

INS' goal is to make its site the first stop for people who need timely and accurate immigration information and forms. The new Web site provides information to help current or intending immigrants access INS services and benefits and to find out how and where to file their applications. It also has in-depth information about INS and its programs that help the public better understand the agency's mission, goals and accomplishments. In addition, special sections target the specific information needs of groups such as historians, genealogists, teachers, students, congressional staffers, the media, lawyers and immigration interest groups.

INS Online has received awards for design, content and several of its special features. The History, Genealogy and Education section won the Family Favorites Award from Ancestry.com, and was a featured Research Site of the Month on AOL's Government Guide. In March, *USA Today* featured the INS Web site as a "Best Bet for Educators" and has recognized the site for its "exceptional graphics as well as unique and interesting content."

Customers who consult the INS Web site avoid letter writing or visits to INS offices for basic immigration information and forms, resulting in better, quicker service. Using the Web site also relieves delays on INS' telephone lines and at local offices because of frequent overloading.

National Records Center

To boost agency efficiency and provide customers more timely service, INS opened its National Records Center (NRC) in Lee's Summit, Missouri, in November 1999. The Center will centralize the more than 25 million INS alien records (A-files) currently stored in more than 80 INS sites throughout the United States into a single, state-of-the-art facility.

This initiative will significantly improve the integrity of INS record keeping and cut the time spent on file retrieval—a vital component of application processing and still a source of delay for many applicants—from weeks and even months to only a few days. Moreover, it will enhance data integrity by ensuring that source records match INS' electronic data files. Finally, it will help INS progress from paper-based to electronic-based records—further enhancing business operations and customer service.

The NRC began its first phase of operations with approximately 130 employees. When fully operational, the NRC will occupy approximately 200,000 square feet and employ more than 400 people to provide records management and information retrieval services, Freedom of Information Act/Privacy Act processing, and immigrant status verification services to benefit-granting agencies and employers.

As of the end of May 2000, local INS offices have transferred 3.7 million files to the National Records Center. The retrieval of these centralized files has been cut dramatically from several weeks to only one day—over 90 percent are transferred to the requesting office within one day of request. Moreover, the local office space previously used to house these files is now available to meet other operational needs.

Applying Naturalization Initiatives to Other Immigration Benefits

In the past few years, INS has had to face enormous challenges stemming from an explosion of naturalization applications. From 1993 to 1999, 6.4 million immigrants applied for citizenship, more than the total in the previous 37 years combined.

Faced with this unprecedented workload and the reality that the agency service structure was limited—with very little automation and very little customer orientation—rebuilding the naturalization system became INS' top service priority.

The success of this effort became evident during FY 1999 when INS achieved its production goal by completing more than 1.2 million naturalization applications—a 105 percent increase from FY 1998 (610,547). The agency also fulfilled its commitment to cut in half the national average length of time it takes to process a naturalization application to 12 months—down from 28 months at the beginning of the fiscal year.

By the end of the second quarter, FY 2000, the naturalization caseload stood at about 1.2 million—the lowest it has been since April 1997. The agency remains confident that it will be able to complete 1.3 million naturalization applications this fiscal year. By achieving this goal, and if application receipts stay at a projected rate of 500,000 this year, INS will reduce the national average projected processing time to approximately six months by the end of FY 2000.

INS increased production for the naturalization program by implementing a number of initiatives in FY 1999. These included: eliminating processing bottlenecks, improving the performance of new automated systems and their interfaces with other systems, allocating additional funding for application processing needs (i.e., contract support, overtime), and hiring 200 additional adjudicators.

In FY 2000, as the agency continues to make progress in handling the naturalization backlog, it is extending naturalization initiatives to the adjustment of status backlog and to the Green Card (Form I-551) renewal program, thereby expanding progress to these vital immigration services.

Adjustment of Status

Adjustment of status is the procedure that allows certain aliens already in the United States—who are eligible to receive an immigrant visa and for whom one is immediately available—to apply for immigrant status with INS.

The agency's adjustment-of-status application workload nearly doubled between FY 1994 and FY 1995 when Section 245(i) of the Immigration and Nationality Act was implemented. This provision applies to illegal aliens residing in the United States who, although otherwise eligible for an immigrant visa abroad, are barred from adjusting their status in the United States. Section 245(i) allows such individuals to pay a penalty fee and apply with INS for adjustment of status in the United States, instead of acquiring their visa abroad from the Department of State. *(Because Section 245(i) expired on January 14, 1998, this provision is currently available only to those aliens who are the beneficiary of either an immigrant visa petition or application for labor certification filed on or before the expiration date.)*

The pending workload of adjustment-of-status applications increased almost eight-fold from FY 1994 to FY 1999 (from 121,000 to 951,000)—creating long waits for customers. In FY 2000, INS began applying some naturalization improvement initiatives to the adjustment-of-status program to help clear the backlog and improve service to customers. Mid-year FY 2000 data are very encouraging.

Preliminary data indicate that the agency completed 137,916 adjustment-of-status applications during the second quarter of FY 2000. This is a 74 percent increase over the same time period last year, during which 79,433 were completed, and a 60 percent increase over the 86,180 applications completed in the first quarter of FY 2000. The adjustment-of-status caseload stood at 1,003,931 applications at the end of the second quarter, FY 2000.

The agency is confident that if application receipts remain at a projected rate of 483,000 this year, INS will be able to achieve its goal of completing 500,000 adjustment of status applications in FY 2000 by extending initiatives implemented last fiscal year to boost naturalization production.

By the end of the second quarter of this year, the national average projected processing time for adjustment-of-status applications decreased to 22 months—down dramatically from the 36-month processing time at the end of the first quarter. While projected processing times often fluctuate from month to month, if the current trend continues, the agency would exceed its stated goal of a 24-month average processing time by the end of FY 2000.

Green Card Renewal

In the fall of 1989, INS began issuing Green Cards (Form I-551) with 10-year expiration dates indicated on the front of the card. INS estimates that up to 660,000 lawful

permanent residents will need to renew their Green Cards during FY 2000. INS is implementing new procedures to handle this volume of work and improve customer service.

Mid-year FY 2000 data indicate that INS' efforts have been successful. According to informal reporting from INS Service Centers, the agency is processing Form I-90 applications, including Green Card renewals, within an average of five months—down considerably from a 12-month average processing time at the end of FY 1999. *(Processing time estimates cover the period from the date INS receives the completed application until the date the new Green Card is mailed to the applicant.)* INS remains on track to achieve its goal of an average 90-day turnaround for Green Card Renewal applications by the end of FY 2000.

To maximize efficiency and customer service, as of June 20, INS has been providing most Green Card renewal applicants the convenience of one-stop, walk-in service at their local INS Application Support Centers (ASCs). (Exceptions are: New York; Los Angeles; Laredo, Tex.; Columbus, Ohio; Jackson, Miss.; Nashville, Tenn.; Salisbury, Md.; Houlton, Me. and Sault Ste. Marie, Mich.)

There are more than 120 ASCs throughout the country—about 50 located within an existing INS District or Sub-Office and the remaining located in separate facilities to enhance accessibility to customers. Renewal applicants are directed to call the INS National Customer Service Center toll-free telephone line **1-800-375-5283** or consult the INS Web site at www.ins.usdoj.gov for information on how and where to apply.

Next Steps

While INS has made impressive strides in improving customer service, there is a lot more the agency needs to do to reach its goal of becoming a world-class service organization. Plans are currently under way to:

- Revise the naturalization application to make it more user-friendly, and improve the naturalization testing process to promote consistency;
- Expand services available at the more than 120 INS Application Support Centers nationwide;
- Further reduce the pending caseload of applications/petitions and—with vital funding support from Congress—eliminate backlogs and restore timely processing of all applications/petitions; and
- Upgrade technology to provide customers the ability to check the status of their applications/petitions over the Internet and via the INS' toll-free telephone system (by the end of FY 2001), and to electronically file applications/petitions via the Internet (within the next three to five years).

¹ Live assistance is available (Monday through Friday) in **Alaska**=8 a.m.–5 p.m., **Hawaii**=8 a.m.–4 p.m., **Puerto Rico** and the **U.S. Virgin Islands**=9 a.m.–6 p.m.