

Government Commits to Investigating USCIS Processing Delays

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How are the late night shows not all over this one? In what might be the most ironic news ever, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) will be investigating processing delays at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)—although they estimate that there will be a delay of five months before they begin the study. USCIS processing delays have reached “crisis levels,” according to a recent analysis of USCIS data by the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA).

While the delay in investigating the delay is somewhat funny, ultimately, the investigation is good news. This is the first time in more than a decade that the GAO has agreed to look into this problem, which has led to applications for visas, permanent residence and other immigration benefits taking longer than ever to process. Things have gotten so bad that members of Congress have taken time out of their busy PR schedules to [send a letter to the GAO](#) calling for an investigation into the lengthy backlog and wait times derailing the USCIS from meeting its “statutory mission of being a service-oriented agency that efficiently processes immigration-related applications and petitions.”

Based on [USCIS published numbers for FY2015 to FY2019](#) (up to March 31, 2019), the average processing times for all listed application types (combined) is up 71 percent since FY2015, even despite declining numbers of new applications and higher fees to ostensibly cover the cost of processing applications. Overall average processing times for USCIS cases have [increased 91 percent since FY2014](#), according to AILA.

Since 2006, the USCIS has been developing and moving toward implementing a “Transformation Program” including an electronic system to support and modernize immigration application filing and processing. However, as noted in a March 16, 2017 [GAO report](#), the program has been plagued with schedule delays, resulting in the USCIS incurring “costs for maintaining its existing systems while the program awaits full implementation.” The report also noted the GAO’s finding that the “USCIS’s ability to achieve program goals, including enhanced national security, better customer service, and operational efficiency improvements, will be delayed. Recurring delays are partly the result of challenges in program management.”

The [USCIS’s 2019-2021 Strategic Plan](#) continues to list “ensur[ing] fair and efficient adjudication of benefits and delivery of information” and “continuously improv[ing] key processes, programs and systems” as strategic goals.

It will be interesting to see the results of this investigation—and if it makes any real difference whatsoever, in the long run. LMWF is hopeful that the investigation will do more than expose what seem like undeniable connections

between USCIS policies, processing delays and backlogs. The GAO will likely make recommendations in its concluding report; if the GAO's recommendations are adopted by the agency—as all four of the recommendations resulting from the last investigation (in 2005) were—things could start moving in the right direction in 2020, or possibly even sooner if the USCIS feels it will be held accountable.

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