U. S. Department of Justice
IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE

BACKGROUNDER 08/07/98

Naturalization: Why Is It Taking So Long?

Naturalization applicants are rightfully frustrated by long delays—in some locations as long as two years—to complete the naturalization process. These delays, which also are of utmost concern to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), are the result of an unprecedented surge in citizenship applications coupled with the agency's need to rebuild the entire naturalization system. Building the most secure and timely naturalization system is INS' highest priority.

Background––The Steps Involved in Naturalization Processing

Completing the processing of a naturalization application—from receipt to oath ceremony—is, in itself, a time-consuming, labor-intensive process that requires a significant amount of time and a host of people within the agency. To ensure integrity, quality assurance checks are made throughout the entire system, which involves five basic processing stages:

Initial Processing. An INS Service Center receives the application and follows through on a number of major steps related to:

- Data entry of application information;
- Requesting the applicant's permanent file from all 80 INS locations (if the applicant's file is not found after a diligent 90-day minimum search, a temporary file is created); and
- Scheduling the applicant for fingerprinting at specific INS facility.

Fingerprinting. Involves three different entities:

- **INS Application Support Center** (ASC) takes fingerprints on card and sends the card back to the Service Center;
- **INS Service Center** transfers the fingerprint card information onto a "Machine Readable Data" (MRD) tape and sends both tape and fingerprint cards to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI);
- **The FBI** checks fingerprints against criminal databases and sends response back to the Service Center. The average wait time for a response from the FBI is 30-45 days; and
- After FBI background check is received, INS Service Center forwards the applicant's file to local INS office for interview.

Interviewing. The application is reviewed and decided at the INS District Office. The process involves the following steps:

- Local office receives the case and assigns it to an adjudicator;
- Adjudicator interviews applicant to ensure he/she meets all eligibility requirements (is 18 years of age, has knowledge of English and U.S. government, is of good moral character, and has fulfilled specific residency requirements);
- Adjudicator recommends approval or denial;
- Supervisor reviews all cases in which a denial is recommended. The supervisor also must review all cases with recommendations to grant citizenship in which:
- The applicant has a criminal arrest record,
- The applicant's permanent file is missing and a temporary file was created, or
- The applicant has applied for a disability waiver.
- Senior immigration officer reviews a quality assurance worksheet to ensure all

appropriate steps were taken;
- If application is approved, the database is updated with the decision, and a naturalization certificate is printed; and
- Applicant is notified to appear at oath ceremony.

Oath Ceremony. Depending on the laws of each locality, the applicant is sworn in at either a judicial ceremony, which is scheduled by the federal or state court system, or at an administrative ceremony which is scheduled by the local INS office.

File Close Out. The local INS office updates database to reflect the applicant's naturalization.

Unprecedented Surge of Applications

While for the past 30 years INS had been receiving anywhere from 100,000 to 300,000 naturalization applications each year, in FY 1995 application receipts soared to approximately one million. Last year (FY 1997), INS received nearly 1.6 million applications, more than four times the number received in FY 1992. Despite this record increase, there was no parallel increase in staffing to handle the workload.

Moreover, in addition to naturalization applications, the total number of immigration benefit applications received by INS during this same period grew by nearly 60 percent, from 4.1 million to 6.5 million—a record volume that caused further processing delays, whether that be for naturalization, securing a Green Card or obtaining an H1-B visa or any other benefits.

INS has had to quickly mobilize and completely rebuild the naturalization system. INS' existing service structure, which was built to handle a considerably smaller volume, was clogged by the avalanche of applications.

Rebuilding the System

The rebuilding process began last year by focusing on ensuring integrity and making the system more secure. Some of these efforts have contributed to the delay in processing the pending caseload of applications:

- **New Quality Assurance Procedures.** Beginning in 1997, INS implemented a series of quality assurance procedures to improve the naturalization process by helping to ensure that all applications were being handled in an appropriate and uniform fashion. In December 1997, KPMG Peat Marwick, an independent management consulting and accounting firm, validated the effectiveness of these efforts.

- **New Fingerprinting Requirements and Procedures.** In December 1997, INS reconstructed the entire fingerprinting process to improve its integrity. Instead of relying on private entities for fingerprinting services, INS began implementing new fingerprinting procedures that required naturalization applicants, and eventually all other immigration benefit applicants, to be fingerprinted by INS. Since December, INS has established 120 ASCs in communities across the country to handle this major new requirement and provide convenient service to applicants.

Major Bottlenecks

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Records Centralization. Despite INS' significant technological strides, the agency is still reliant on paper case files, with 25 million files located in 80 offices across the country. A major step toward greater efficiency would be centralization of INS paper records. This would allow INS to cut file retrieval time to a matter of a few days from the current time of weeks and sometimes even months. It will result in more timely application processing, not only for naturalization but for all immigration benefits. In November 1997, INS asked Congress to approve a comprehensive plan to move paper records out of district office file rooms into a central facility. As soon as Congress endorses the centralization plan, INS plans to move ahead with this key feature of reengineering.