



Frequently Asked Questions

September 15, 2008

Direct Mail Program Adds Form N-400, Application for Naturalization

Questions & Answers

Q: How will filing N-400 applications directly with a Lockbox improve business processes or streamline the application process?

A: In the past, these processing steps occurred at a Service Center or Field Office. USCIS has studied its model of using numerous locations for various processes and has found that, in many instances, a more centralized approach will improve efficiency for the government and the paying customer. USCIS has learned that having any process completed at numerous locations can lead to inconsistencies, which include, but are not limited to, variance in processing times and different handling procedures evolving at various sites. By centralizing key functions relative to N-400 case processing, USCIS customers will deal with only one entity for this application type. Customers filing an N-400 application will experience little visible affect due to this centralization.

Q: Is it a cost-saver for USCIS to centralize N-400 processing at Lockboxes and the National Benefits Center (NBC)?

A: Yes. The centralization of application handling, case processing and subsequent staging of the N-400s will result in cost savings to the government and faster, more efficient processing times for USCIS customers. This change is also part of the USCIS initiative to further centralize filing and pre-interview processing for cases that require an interview at a local USCIS Field Office.

N-400 processing is a multi-step operation that has involved Service Centers around the country, which receive applications from customers within each Service Center's geographic jurisdictional boundaries. Service Centers have performed fee receipting, data entry, file set-up, required security checks and file staging for numerous Field Offices for many years. Having four centers perform these tasks has led to various inconsistencies due to logistical/space related issues, staffing irregularities and differing interpretations of procedure and policy. All N-400 applications received at a Service Center are ultimately adjudicated at a Field Office where applicants are scheduled for an interview. An operational model requiring four USCIS Service Centers to move thousands of N-400 case files to numerous adjudicating offices has not proven to be the most effective processing model. That is now being changed.

Centralizing the initial processing of N-400s at the NBC increases the efficiency of case management and improves customer service. The NBC will focus on creating and maintaining applicant files, completing national security checks, and various other processing steps. The NBC will also hold all N-400 cases waiting for adjudicative interview. Field Offices will make requests to only one site, the NBC, for cases to be retrieved and mailed in a much more efficient and time-sensitive fashion. Customer inquiries will only travel back to this one site, affording quicker response time and daily resolution for customer inquiries.

Q: How is this change beneficial to the applicant?

A: As stated above, the centralization of N-400 staging and distribution will have numerous positive effects for USCIS customers. Eventual decreases in customer waiting time and increased productivity in overall N-400 case processing are the ultimate goals of USCIS. These results, coupled with overall sustained quality and adherence to all tenants of national security, will be the final measure of success for this transitional effort.

Q: How is this change beneficial to USCIS and will this result in improved security?

A: USCIS falls within the Department of Homeland Security and one of the cornerstone functions for USCIS is to protect the American people through the implementation and completion of numerous policies and procedures related to national security. This processing change will NOT affect the completion of these procedures. USCIS remains committed to the highest standards regarding national security. The centralization of all N-400 applications for those seeking this country's highest immigration benefit will afford this agency the opportunity to streamline and standardize security checks. All applications will be reviewed at one facility and communication will flow in and out of this one location. Disparity among different processing sites will be an item of the past. If an item related to security arises, it will be addressed and reported immediately at this one site. The end result is an overall improved response to security related matters by USCIS.

By implementing a centralized collection and deposit process, USCIS will also benefit from improved financial controls. This will enhance the security related to fee collections and timely deposits and the reporting of financial data.

Q: What steps did USCIS go through to determine centralized processing would result in faster case adjudication?

A: USCIS has spent the last several months planning every aspect of this centralization. Legacy procedures, practices and systems have been reviewed, tested and modified to make this proposal a success. USCIS has worked in conjunction with Service Centers, Field Offices, legal counsel, information technology and numerous other divisions to ensure that every aspect of this process has been scrutinized. This collaboration has helped to ensure that customer applications will not be delayed following newly implemented procedures. The overall goals, as stated in the various responses above, are to increase quality, decrease processing times, and decrease customer inquiry response times.

Q: How will this change impact the staff at the Service Centers who used to process the applications?

A: Service Center staff that was previously assigned to N-400 related processing will be reassigned to other tasks. With the exception of abandonment denials, adjudication of N-400 applications has never occurred at the Service Centers, so the adjudicative impact will be minimal. Clerical staff, quality assurance personnel and customer inquiry personnel will be assigned to other processing workloads and will continue to complete critical processing, quality review and national security procedures at each USCIS site.

Contract personnel responsible for N-400 processing at the four centers will be affected to a certain extent. Contractual understanding has been in place for some time allowing communication, awareness and progressive planning for this transition to occur. Some downsizing may occur at the Service Centers due to this centralization; however, staffing adjustments will be made where possible and on an as-needed basis to continue employment of displaced personnel.

Q: Will the NBC now be responsible for adjudicating N-400 fee waiver requests for cases filed at the Lockbox?

A: USCIS staff at the Lockbox will review cases with a fee waiver request that are mailed to the Lockbox. USCIS staff will determine whether a fee waiver request is granted based on the circumstances and evidence supplied by the applicant in support of a fee waiver request.

Q: What types of N-400 cases will be filed at the Lockbox and processed by the NBC?

A: All N-400 cases will be filed at the Lockbox except for N-400s filed by two categories of applicants:

- 1) N-400 filed by a veteran, or an active member of the US Armed Forces, who is filing under section 328 or 329 of the INA; and
- 2) N-400 filed by the spouse of an active member of the US Armed Forces.

The two categories of applicants listed above will file at the Nebraska Service Center. The NBC will not accept N-400 filings mailed directly from the public to their location. Any N-400 application that is mailed to the NBC from the public will be returned.

Q: What will the N-400 process be at the NBC?

A: The NBC will perform pre-interview processing in much the same manner as the Service Centers have done for the last several years. Background checks will be initiated and completed, and applicant A-files will be requested and received. A complete file review will be performed on cases and NBC will issue a notice to the applicant if the applicant needs to bring additional evidence to the interview at the local USCIS Field Office. Further improvements of the N-400 process will be implemented as the NBC process is refined to provide, to the extent possible, decision-ready cases for Field Offices at the time of interview and to reduce the number of continuances at the time of interview.