

Notably, the CAO has other responsibilities. In addition to public inquiries, the CAO serves as a back-up unit for congressional and DHS Executive Secretary inquiries. It appears that the Ombudsman's inquiries receive lower priority to these other inquiries.

Moreover, oftentimes the CAO uses the Service Request Management Tool to contact field offices. Although the field office should get back to the CAO within 30 days, these SRMT requests sometimes go unanswered. By providing the Ombudsman direct access to USCIS offices, response to correspondence would be streamlined and, thereby, enhance the ability of the Ombudsman to meet the statutory mandate to assist individuals and employers.

Finally, in many instances, the CAO's standard form responses do not provide adequate information to customers. As a result, customers often return to the Ombudsman for further assistance. Many customers approach the Ombudsman because they could not obtain satisfactory assistance through USCIS channels, such as the toll free telephone number, appointments at the local field office via INFOPASS and the Case Status Online system, or through USCIS addressed congressional inquiries.

VIII. 2007-2008 REPORTING YEAR OBJECTIVES

In 2007-2008, the Ombudsman will continue to identify areas in which individuals and employers have problems dealing with USCIS and, to the extent possible, propose changes to mitigate identified problems. The Ombudsman will gather information and feedback from USCIS customers and stakeholders by continuing to: (1) conduct frequent site visits to USCIS facilities throughout the country; (2) meet regularly with community, employer, and immigration law organizations; and (3) expand individual and employer access to the Ombudsman.

The Ombudsman will improve the process for resolving problems individuals and employers face in dealing with USCIS by establishing a Virtual Ombudsman's Office to provide for online case problem submission, improved analysis and reporting capabilities, and electronic interface with customers and stakeholders to share concerns and solutions. As discussed in this report, the Ombudsman also looks forward to improving the partnership with USCIS to address both individual case problems and systemic issues.

The Ombudsman will continue to staff its operations with subject matter experts, who have both government and private sector experience, including federal employees and other experts contracted for specific projects. Issues for the next reporting period will include: (1) assessment of NCSC call centers and the USCIS response to public inquiries; (2) evaluation of the cost and efficiency of premium processing relative to regular processing; (3) review of the effectiveness of dividing responsibilities between field and service center operations; (4) assessment of the up-front processing pilots and the 90-day green card programs; (5) review of USCIS' progress in implementing a strategic human capital plan; and (6) assessment of the accuracy and value of the production data USCIS collects.

Additionally, the Ombudsman will continue to initiate and expand activities to promote interagency cooperation and holistic approaches to immigration, as illustrated by the existing monthly meetings with the DOS, DOL, and offices within USCIS focused on employment-based

green card processing workflows. The Ombudsman seeks to build understanding and partnerships where possible between stakeholders and USCIS through conferences and workshops on both general and specific immigration issues. In assisting individuals and employers as they interface with USCIS, the Ombudsman's objectives are to promote transparency and accountability in the agency's operations and policy.