



Highlights of [GAO-06-20](#), a report to Congressional Requestors

Why GAO Did This Study

Long-standing backlogs of immigration benefit applications result in delays for immigrants, their families, and prospective employers who participate in the legal immigration process. In response to a statutory mandate to eliminate the backlog, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) set a goal of September 30, 2006, to eliminate the backlog and adjudicate all applications within 6 months. This report examines (1) the status of the backlog, (2) actions to achieve backlog elimination and prevent future backlogs, (3) the likelihood of eliminating the backlog by the deadline, and (4) USCIS's quality assurance programs to achieve consistency of decisions while eliminating its backlog.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that USCIS (1) ensure that its technology improvement efforts support the ability to generate information on the actual age of individual applications, (2) identify and articulate in its plans the benefits it expects to realize from its investment in technology transformation, and (3) develop a comprehensive quality assurance program that applies to all types of benefit applications and that addresses adjudication processes and reasonableness of decisions.

We provided a draft of this report to USCIS for review. USCIS agreed with our findings and recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-20.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Paul L. Jones at (202) 512-8777 or JonesPL@gao.gov.

IMMIGRATION BENEFITS

Improvements Needed to Address Backlogs and Ensure Quality of Adjudications

What GAO Found

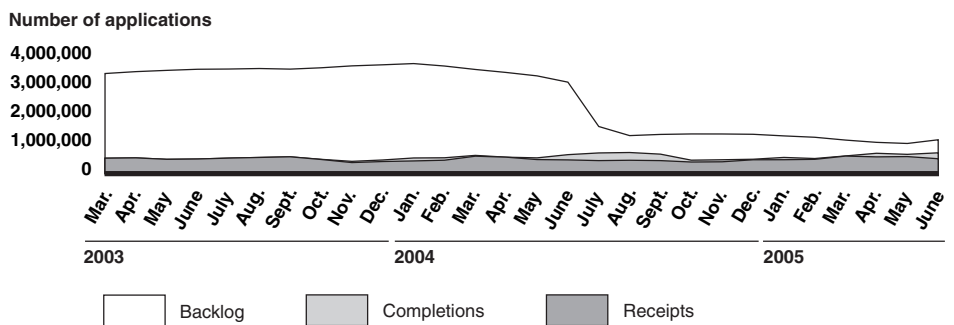
By June 2005, USCIS estimated it had reduced its backlog from a peak of 3.8 million cases to about 1.2 million. However, this estimate is not a measure of the number of pending cases older than 6 months—the definition of backlog used by the Immigration Services and Infrastructure Improvements Act of 2000. USCIS's current data systems cannot provide precise data on the age of all application types. A proposed technology transformation offers an opportunity to develop a case management system with this capability.

USCIS has reduced its backlog mainly by increasing and realigning staff. To prevent future backlogs, USCIS will rely on additional staffing reallocation and technology transformation. However, the technology plan is in the early planning stages, and USCIS has not finalized its estimated cost or identified the gains it could yield.

Despite progress, it is unlikely that USCIS will completely eliminate the backlog by the 2006 deadline. While it met fiscal year 2006 targets for half of the 15 backlogged application types, USCIS may have difficulty eliminating its backlog for two complex application types that constitute nearly three-quarters of the backlog. A backlog may also remain in offices where the volume of cases exceeds adjudicator staff capacity. Other factors, such as lengthy background checks, could also hinder USCIS's ability to achieve and maintain its backlog elimination goals. USCIS officials noted that its current plan is premised on current legislation and would be affected by proposed legislative changes that could impose additional demands on the agency.

Aside from regular supervisory review, USCIS operates two programs to ensure the quality of its postadjudication decisions, yet neither program provides a systematic and inclusive review of all application types. One program reviews adjudicators' compliance with standard processes for two application types, and the other evaluates compliance with standard processes and the reasonableness of decisions rendered, but only for selected applications processed in four centers.

Benefit Applications Received, Completed, and Backlogged, March 2003-June 2005



Source: GAO analysis of USCIS's Performance Management System data.