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General Government Division

B-284779

May 23, 2000

The Honorable Judy Biggert
House of Representatives

Subject: Immigration and Naturalization Service: Information on the Disposition of Naturalization Cases and on Courtesy as a Factor in Employee Performance Appraisals

Dear Ms. Biggert:

At our meeting with you on February 2, 2000, you requested that in the course of our work on the Immigration and Naturalization Service's (INS) naturalization application processing, we obtain information on two matters. First, you asked us to inquire about the disposition of naturalization cases from the Chicago District Office that were lost¹ at the Nebraska Service Center in 1997 and/or 1998. Second, you asked us to determine if INS employee performance appraisals included a dimension pertaining to the courteousness with which staff provide service to customers. We reviewed these issues and our responses follow.

Results in Brief

Recurrent problems with transferring naturalization case data from one automated system used by the service centers to another used by district offices caused cases to be inadvertently dropped at the Nebraska Service Center, as well as the other three INS service centers, according to an INS Nebraska Service Center official. Data were not available on the number of cases that were inadvertently dropped during transfer. An official from the Nebraska Service Center estimated that about 4,000 naturalization cases were inadvertently dropped during the data transfer for the Chicago district during fiscal years 1997 and 1998. An official from the California Service Center also told us that this problem occurred at all four service centers. He estimated that over 44,000 naturalization cases were inadvertently dropped at the California Service Center during the data transfer for the Los Angeles district during fiscal years 1997 and 1998. Officials from both of these service centers said that staff identified the cases that were inadvertently dropped during the data transfer and manually entered the case data into INS' automated case management system.

¹ "Lost" naturalization cases are those cases on which automated data were inadvertently dropped during the transfer from one system used by INS service centers to another system used by INS district offices. As a result, some naturalization cases were missing from the automated system that district offices used to identify cases ready for interview and final adjudication. A hard copy of the case files and the automated records still existed at INS' service centers.

Since INS did not have a list of the specific cases that were inadvertently dropped, it could not determine how many of these cases had been adjudicated. On May 1, 2000, INS directed its field offices to undertake new initiatives to ensure that all individuals who submitted naturalization applications before July 1, 1998, would be interviewed by September 30, 2000.

Although the particular problem that caused naturalization cases to be inadvertently dropped during data transfers in fiscal years 1997 and 1998 no longer exists, according to INS Nebraska and California Service Center officials, new instances of dropped cases during data transfers have occurred with INS' deployment of a new naturalization automated case tracking system. We plan to include further information on this issue as part of our ongoing review of INS application processing.

The INS offices that we contacted generally had courtesy or tactfulness as a performance standard on the appraisal forms of employees who routinely deal with the public. INS' Chicago District Office, Nebraska Service Center, and California Service Center included this standard for employees who routinely deal with the public at those offices. The Los Angeles District Office included this standard for one of the three positions that routinely deal with the public at that office, but did not include it for the other two positions.

Background

Until December 1995, INS district offices were responsible for all processing of applications for naturalization. In January 1996, selected INS district offices began forwarding naturalization applications to one of INS' four service centers for initial processing. By June 1998, INS required that applicants mail all naturalization applications directly to an INS service center. The service centers are responsible for collecting fees, entering fee and other data into automated systems, and processing naturalization applications up to the point where the applicant needed to be personally interviewed. The district offices are then responsible for scheduling and conducting interviews and making the decision to approve or deny the applicant.

From January 1996 to June 1998, the service centers entered initial data from naturalization applications, including fee amount received, into INS' automated application information system, the Computer Linked Application Information Management System (CLAIMS 3). Data from CLAIMS 3 were then to be transferred to INS' naturalization case management system, the Reengineered Naturalization Automated Casework System (RNACS). In December 1997, INS began to deploy a new case management system, CLAIMS 4, which could be used for both fee receipting (previously provided by CLAIMS 3) and case management and tracking (previously provided by RNACS). By June 1998, CLAIMS 4 had been deployed to INS' four service centers.

Although all four service centers have CLAIMS 4, not all of INS' 33 district offices have CLAIMS 4. INS plans called for deploying CLAIMS 4 to all district offices by December 2000. For districts that still use RNACS for naturalization case management, service centers must transfer data from CLAIMS 4 to RNACS in order for the districts to schedule interviews and adjudicate the cases.

Disposition of Naturalization Cases

Transferring data from CLAIMS 3 to RNACS was problematic at all INS service centers in fiscal years 1997 and 1998, according to Nebraska and California Service Center officials. They told us that some naturalization cases were inadvertently dropped during automated data transfers during those years. Although they had no quantitative data, the Nebraska and California Service Center officials estimated that about 4,000 naturalization cases from the Chicago district, and over 44,000 cases from the Los Angeles district, were inadvertently dropped by these two service centers during fiscal years 1997 and 1998. A California Service Center official explained that the larger number of dropped cases at his center was due to two factors: (1) the California Service Center received more naturalization applications than the Nebraska Service Center, and (2) dropped cases occurred over a longer period of time because California received CLAIMS 4 in May 1998, about 5 months after Nebraska received it.

Officials from both the Nebraska and California Service Centers told us that staff had systematically identified and manually entered the dropped cases into RNACS during fiscal years 1998 and 1999. According to a California Service Center official, INS headquarters helped identify the dropped cases by comparing RNACS data with data from an automated file location system. Cases that were in the file location system but not in RNACS were those that were dropped during the transfer of CLAIMS 3 data from the service centers to the RNACS system used by the district offices.

INS was unable to determine if all dropped naturalization cases had been adjudicated because they did not have a list of these cases. Recognizing that applications are to be processed in the order received and that some cases received prior to July 1, 1998, had not yet been interviewed or adjudicated, INS informed its field offices of a new initiative on May 1, 2000. Under the initiative, all naturalization cases received before July 1, 1998, are to be scheduled for interviews by September 30, 2000.

According to INS officials, the problem of naturalization cases being inadvertently dropped during the data transfers between automated systems has continued to occur. Because CLAIMS 4 replaced CLAIMS 3 at INS service centers, data transfers between CLAIMS 3 and RNACS are no longer done. Therefore, the opportunity for cases to be dropped in this particular way no longer exists. However, INS officials told us that cases have been dropped in the process of transferring cases from CLAIMS 4 to RNACS; that is when naturalization cases are transferred by the service centers to the district offices that do not yet have CLAIMS 4. This problem may continue to some degree at least until December 2000, when CLAIMS 4 is expected to be deployed to all district offices currently using RNACS, and data transfers between CLAIMS 4 and RNACS should no longer be necessary.

INS' Chicago District Office received CLAIMS 4 in February 1998. The Los Angeles District Office is scheduled to receive CLAIMS 4 in December 2000. We plan to include further analysis on the nature and extent of INS' problems in transferring data from CLAIMS 4 to RNACS and make any needed recommendations as part of our ongoing review of INS application processing.

Courtesy as a Factor In Employee Performance Appraisals

According to INS officials, the primary types of employees that deal with the public in-person or by telephone include adjudications officers, immigration information officers, and application clerks assigned to district offices and/or service centers. District Directors and Service Center Directors are responsible for developing the performance standards for these employees. A uniform INS appraisal form is used to evaluate their performance. The initial section of the form provides space for the specific performance dimensions used to rate the INS employee; the final section is for recording the rating.

The types of employees that deal with the public in-person or by telephone varied by office. Officials from the Chicago and Los Angeles District Offices told us that the employees who routinely deal with the public at those offices are immigration information officers, district adjudications officers, and application clerks. At the California Service Center, immigration information officers and center adjudications officers deal with the public, while at the Nebraska Service Center, only immigration information officers deal with the public.

Based on our review of employee performance appraisal forms used at the Chicago District Office, the Nebraska Service Center, and the California Service Center, we found that courtesy or tactfulness was specifically mentioned as a factor on the appraisal forms of employees who routinely deal with the public. For the Los Angeles District Office courtesy was specifically cited as a factor in the immigration information officer appraisal. It was not cited for district adjudications officers or application clerks. Instead, the Los Angeles adjudications officers were rated on whether interviews were properly conducted, and application clerks were rated on how well they provided information at the information counter. A Los Angeles District Office official told us that while courtesy was not specifically cited as a factor on the appraisal forms of adjudication officers and applications clerks, it would normally be considered when evaluating how well they conduct interviews and provide information.

Scope and Methodology

To address the two objectives, we interviewed INS headquarters officials in the Benefit Systems Division and in the Human Resources and Development Division. We also interviewed officials from the Nebraska Service Center and the Chicago District Office. In addition, we interviewed officials from the California Service Center and the Los Angeles District Office when we visited these locations as part of our ongoing review on INS' application processing. We reviewed documentation provided to us by INS on dropped cases. No quantitative data or list of dropped cases was available from the Nebraska or California Service Centers. We obtained and reviewed copies of performance appraisal forms used by the California and Nebraska Service Centers and the Los Angeles and Chicago District Offices. We did not review completed performance appraisals on INS employees. We conducted our work from February through April 2000 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.


Agency Comments

We provided the Attorney General and the INS Commissioner with a draft of this letter for comment and received oral comments from INS' Acting Deputy Executive Associate Commissioner, Immigration Services Division, on May 5, 2000. INS generally agreed with our findings and provided technical comments, which we incorporated where appropriate.

As agreed with your office, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this letter until 10 days after its date. At that time, we will provide copies to the Honorable Janet Reno, Attorney General; and the Honorable Doris Meissner, INS Commissioner. We will make copies available to others on request.

If you have any questions about this letter, please contact Evi L. Rezmovic or me at (202) 512-8777. The key contributors to this effort were Gretchen Bornhop and Jennifer Kim.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard M. Stana". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Richard M. Stana
Associate Director, Administration of
Justice Issues

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