

News from Congressman David Price (NC-04)

Chairman, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security

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OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN DAVID PRICE *Citizenship and Immigration Services Hearing, 10 am*

This morning we welcome before the Subcommittee Dr. Emilio Gonzalez, Director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, or CIS, along with Deputy Director Jock Scharfen and acting Chief Financial Officer Tim Rosado. We look forward to discussing with you the policy and budgetary issues that confront your agency. The Subcommittee has already met with your counterparts from CBP and ICE, the agencies responsible for ensuring people obey our country's customs and immigration laws. Today, we will discuss the more upbeat topic of legal paths to US residency and citizenship, along with your plans for improving CIS's service to its customers.

CIS's core mission is processing applications filed by those pursuing the legal path to US residency and citizenship. During our hearing last year, I congratulated you on having effectively eliminated CIS's backlog of immigration applications. This past summer, however, CIS received a record numbers of applications, including twice as many filings as normal in the months of July and August, just before the CIS fee increase went into effect. All of this new work means the application backlog has more or less returned. You recently estimated it will take 18 months to process these naturalization applications, instead of CIS's stated goal of under 6 months. I know you share my concern about this situation, and we would like your advice on what this Subcommittee can do to help you expedite processing times.

In January, I led a delegation of members to the Middle East and spoke first hand with the UN High Commission for Refugees, as well as staff at Save the Children and other refugee assistance organizations. One of CIS's most important roles is the efficient processing of refugee applications so that vulnerable individuals can be given the opportunity for a better life in the United States. While I laud the Administration's expansion of the Iraqi refugee quota from 7,000 in 2007 to 12,000 in 2008, I am concerned by estimates that there are 2 million displaced Iraqis throughout the Middle East, with large concentrations in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. I would like to make sure we are doing enough to help those whose displacement from their homes is, to a significant extent, a consequence of U.S. policies. We have particular obligation to those who have worked with our personnel in Iraq and may be in danger for that reason.

CIS plans to improve service to its customers by transforming its business processes and modernizing its information technology systems. A successful transformation will mitigate many of the delays and processing problems that plague CIS, and essentially eliminate paper-based adjudications. In the CIS reprogramming request that the Subcommittee approved last month, however, we learned that the Business Transformation project carried funds forward from

last year because it could not award contracts critical to its work. Hopefully this does not indicate a slipping timeframe for the IT transformation effort, and we will want to hear from you about the status of that effort.

CIS is also responsible for maintaining and promoting the E-Verify system, which allows employers to check the immigration status of new hires. Your budget requests \$100 million for the E-Verify system, a hefty increase from the \$60 million provided by Congress for the current year. While enrollment in the system is growing, I have questions about the rationale for a 67% increase for E-Verify, given that the current 55,000 subscribers use only about 5% of the system's capacity.

Your budget also requests \$50 million for a REAL-ID data system "hub," which will allow State Departments of Motor Vehicles to cross-check driver's license applications against Federal and State databases. I understand CIS may have some technical expertise in this area, but I wonder if this is really a responsibility we should ask CIS to take on, since your plate is already rather full.

We have a lot to discuss, so Dr. Gonzalez I will ask you to give a 5 minute summary of your testimony, and we will enter the rest of your written statement in the hearing record. Before you begin, however, I yield to Mr. Rogers for any comments he has at this time.

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