During the reporting period, the Ombudsman visited over 40 USCIS facilities, including field offices, service centers, and other facilities.[7] The purpose of these visits was to see first-hand the issues that individuals and employers encountered, identify systemic problems, and consult with USCIS field offices on proposed solutions. The travel and site visits provided the Ombudsman opportunities for candid dialogue on a variety of issues including: impact of immigration processing backlogs on families and employers; lack of standardization in immigration adjudications; imprecise and confusing instructions on requests for information for cases; and ongoing problems due to long pending security name checks.

In addition, the Ombudsman expanded the office's outreach by starting a pilot teleconference series for customers and stakeholders with the relevant USCIS components listening in. The Ombudsman continued work to develop a Virtual Ombudsman's Office, and devoted substantial resources to assisting individuals and employers in resolving problems with USCIS.

II.   USCIS TRANSFORMATION

Transformation of USCIS is vital to the agency's future success. As discussed in the 2006 Annual Report (at p. 29), the transformation program encompasses IT modernization efforts, forms revision, and other initiatives to provide USCIS with world-class digital processing capability. However, USCIS has devoted considerable resources to various types of transformation since the 1990s with minimal progress. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) had a history of stagnated transformation efforts. With each new leader, transformation planning begins anew. Its eventual success requires focus, resources, and credible performance measures to assess outcomes.

As stated in the DHS Inspector General's November 2006 Report:

> USCIS recognizes the unique challenges it faces to reengineer business processes and modernize technology to better accomplish mission objectives . . .. The accomplishments to date are steps in the right direction for both business and IT modernization. However, USCIS remains entrenched in a cycle of continual planning, with limited progress toward achieving its long term transformation goals.[8]

The Ombudsman is concerned that the agency's current seven-year initiative will not allow it to implement immediate and necessary changes to address existing pervasive and serious problems.

Currently, the Transformation Program Office is developing three programs:

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[7] *See* Appendix 3 for complete list of facilities visited.

[8] DHS Office of the Inspector General Report, "[USCIS'] Progress in Modernizing Information Technology," OIG-07-11 (Nov. 2006) at 21; http://www.dhs.gov/xoig/assets/mgmtrpts/OIG_07-11_Nov06.pdf (last visited June 3, 2007).

- **Enterprise Document Management System (EDMS)**. EDMS, led by an integrated project team that includes the Transformation Program Office, the Records Division, and the Office of Information Technology, allows USCIS to maintain and access digitized images. It is the first step in moving USCIS from paper-based processes to review of electronic files for adjudications.

- **Adjudication-Ready Scanning for Certain Temporary Protected Status (TPS) Cases**. In early June, the Vermont Service Center (VSC) began reviewing digitized files to adjudicate certain TPS cases.

- **Case Management System for International Adoption Cases.** On July 5, 2007, USCIS is scheduled to deploy a digital case management system for the e-filing and paperless adjudication of international adoption cases.

Also, the Transformation Program Office is revising USCIS forms to improve the ability to collect and use biographic and other information from customers.

The Ombudsman agrees that these are worthwhile goals for USCIS. USCIS' antiquated computer systems are a constant obstacle to delivering timely and efficient immigration benefits services. The continuous revisions to long-term planning detract from short-term initiatives that could yield long-term benefits and provide important relief to USCIS customers and staff well before the seven-year life cycle for transformation. In its search for a 100 percent IT solution, the agency often appears to overlook many commercially available "off the shelf" solutions that could meet the vast majority of its current requirements and solve most of the existing case management problems. It is too easy for USCIS to excuse inefficient procedures and stall replacing antiquated systems in anticipation of a seven-year fix.

> *RECOMMENDATION AR 2007 -- 01*
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> *The Ombudsman recommends that the Transformation Program Office:*
>
> *(1) Publish transformation timelines, goals, and regular updates on the public USCIS website. The Ombudsman is concerned that transformation is proceeding largely without input from customers, Congress, and the public. The lack of transparency enables USCIS to modify deadlines and goals without producing meaningful results.*
>
> *(2) Establish transparency as a goal for USCIS processing and services. The agency provides minimal information to customers who often have long pending applications and petitions. The agency could make its processes more transparent, which would reduce inquiries to the National Customer Service Center (NCSC) and the need for INFOPASS appointments, as well as make available USCIS resources for adjudicative functions.*