### L.        Information Technology Issues

#### 1.        Background

In this reporting period, the effective deployment of information technology (IT) systems to all service centers and field offices remained a significant challenge for USCIS.  USCIS stated in its 2006 Annual Report Response (at p. 12):

> A variety of changes at both the Department and agency level have required modifications or cancellations of [IT] efforts, thereby making progress very difficult.  Some of these changes include: creation of DHS, transitioning from INS to USCIS, changes in appropriated funds available from the Department and Congress, and changes in management of technology within USCIS.
>
> New IT system efforts have been affected by fluctuations in funding and changes in oversight and management structures. Before new systems can be deployed they must be designed, engineered, developed, and tested using state of the art change management resources.

The Ombudsman's continued efforts related to IT focused on three broad concerns:  (1) most USCIS adjudications processes are paper-based; (2) existing USCIS information management systems do not provide robust data analysis tools necessary to monitor productivity and make changes when necessary; and (3) most USCIS information management systems are stand-alone systems with little or no interconnectivity.  More than four years after the creation of USCIS, all of these issues remain.  As DHS Inspector General Richard Skinner testified at a February House of Representatives hearing:

> . . . USCIS remains entrenched in a cycle of continual planning with limited progress toward achieving its long-term transformation goals.  Until USCIS addresses this issue, the bureau will not be in a position to manage existing workloads or handle the potentially dramatic increase in immigration benefits processing workloads that could result from proposed immigration reform legislation.[65]

This annual report highlights some additional areas of concern identified during this reporting period:

#### 2.        IT Transformation

The Transformation Program Office is properly committed to using subject matter experts in the reengineering process.  The Ombudsman commends the office's effort to host

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[65] Inspector General Richard L. Skinner, Statement before the Committee on Homeland Security, U.S. House of Representatives, "An Overview of Issues and Challenges Facing the Department of Homeland Security" (Feb. 7, 2007); http://www.dhs.gov/xoig/assets/testimony/OIGtm_RLS_020707.pdf (last visited June 3, 2007).

workshops in the field to identify business requirements as the first step in transitioning from a paper-based system to an electronic environment.

Another initiative by the Transformation Program Office which is of particular interest is the Integrated Digitization Document Management Program through which paper-based A-files are scanned and stored digitally. While this program is designed to bring the agency into the 21st century, several problems exist. For example, the entire digitization effort and facility were set up and started without USCIS leaders understanding digitization efforts already occurring at the Chicago Lockbox facility. The digitization facility is designed to cover only a small fraction of the paper files maintained by USCIS. The Ombudsman understands from recent discussions with USCIS that testing will begin this summer to allow a small number of adjudicators to access the scanned files.

There appears to be a lack of coordination between the various USCIS offices charged with elements of this process, including digitization, the Lockbox, the forms redesign group, and the A-file content management group. The Transformation Program Office is the logical choice to coordinate these efforts. For example, the Ombudsman learned in a USCIS digitization facility visit shortly after it was set up that senior USCIS personnel responsible for setting it up had not yet visited the Lockbox facility, which was digitizing records for three years. Moreover, these personnel seemed unaware of the type and nature of equipment used at the Lockbox.

### 3.    IT Support

While there is some progress, IT support for current systems as well as support during transformation is critical. USCIS staff at field offices raised the need for IT support numerous times with the Ombudsman during the reporting period. USCIS should institute a process to ensure that necessary transformation projects, such as the computer system updates, do not adversely impact local systems.

USCIS often relies on contract IT personnel for support, but in some cases, the IT support is not located on-site. Very often field offices rely on one of their own employees to provide the necessary on-site support for users and local systems. Use of other non-IT staff to perform IT functions may negatively impact production in the field office, but some offices have no other choice.

### 4.    Local IT Solutions

Until the IT transformation is complete and USCIS has the computer management tools required to accomplish its mission, field offices continue to rely on local systems to provide data necessary to manage offices. Many talented and creative USCIS employees in USCIS offices nationwide have IT expertise and continue to create excellent local systems to: track statistics; generate Notices to Appear; provide receipts to track locally filed applications; and track mail and congressional inquiries, among others. These systems should be shared with all USCIS offices as best practices in the absence of national systems available to provide needed information and do necessary tasks. Moreover, USCIS should commend its staff on the innovative solutions created.

USCIS should support local systems during this transitional time. IT personnel need to be responsive to field office requirements.

> *BEST PRACTICE*
>
> *In the absence of a case management system and other simple fixes to track the numbers of visas available, many offices use off-the-shelf software to track pending preference-based employment and family cases to readily identify when priority dates are current and cases can be adjudicated.*
>
> *For example, the Tampa Field Office uses a simple, yet highly effective, spreadsheet to accomplish this task.  Similarly, the Texas Service Center uses a database system to track and account for this information, while the Vermont Service Center has another off-the-shelf database program with similar results.*

### 5.    Lack of Purchasing Coordination

A disconnect exists between field offices and headquarters in the purchase of IT-related equipment.  One field office purchased webcams for approximately $150 per unit, prior to establishment of a contract for this equipment.  Now this equipment is no longer supported by USCIS IT because there is a contract for camcorders, at a cost of approximately $2,000 each, to tape interviews.  This equipment is not only considerably more expensive, but is also cumbersome and more difficult for the officers to use.  As a result of the additional expense, only a few of the adjudicators in that field office have videotaping capability.

*OBSERVATIONS AND STAKEHOLDER COMMENTS FROM THE OMBUDSMAN'S TRIPS AND MEETINGS*

*In the **New York Field Office**, managers heavily rely on local systems to track case production.  As of December 2006, ICE no longer supports local systems for USCIS, and at the time of the visit, USCIS had not identified a replacement.*

*The **Philadelphia Field Office** reported that when computers were refreshed with updated software, many previously available software packages were not reloaded.  As a result, staff could not access previously created documents.  At the time of the visit, this office operated with remote IT staff instead of onsite support.*

*In **Newark**, the office reported that the IT Help Desk has conflicting priorities as it is responsible to ICE/CBP and their contracts are administered by ICE.*

***Newark** developed its own receipting system for tracking locally filed applications, but this database was lost when the mandated computer refresh took place.*

*The **Des Moines Field Office** noted that headquarters sometimes issues directives without determining whether they can be implemented in local offices.  For example, one memo required scanning EAD applications and forwarding them to the applicable service center, although Des Moines has no scanner.  At the time of the visit, if Des Moines had IT problems, the office had to rely on an IT person located in Omaha.*

*RECOMMENDATIONS AR 2007 -- 15*

*The Ombudsman also recommends that USCIS:*

*(1) Ensure that a computer refresh does not adversely impact local systems.*

*(2) Make available to each local office software that is authorized to enable offices to continue to use previously created documents in those systems; and*

*(3) Consider a long-term solution to the onsite support issue such as a central system.*