RECOMMENDATION AR 2007 --12

USCIS currently uses substantial resources to issue and review RFEs for information that already was submitted or was unclear in the original application instructions. While the agency in its 2006 Annual Report Response (at p. 17) indicates that it continues to work to improve the clarity of form instructions, the Ombudsman recommends that USCIS develop:

(1) Clearer application instructions so that applicants provide the required documentation at the outset;

(2) Transparent and easily understandable rejection criteria; and

(3) RFEs written in simple, more direct language with less legalese and personalized to the recipient for the limited instances in which RFEs would be issued.

K.   Coordination and Communication

In its 2006 Annual Report Response (at p. 14), USCIS indicated that "[c]oordination and communication between and among all USCIS offices has improved as technology [expanded]." The Ombudsman commends USCIS for providing "a great deal more information . . . to officers today than even just a year ago." While there has been improvement, the issues and concerns expressed in the Ombudsman's 2005 and 2006 Annual Report mostly remain. Coordination and communication continues to be one of USCIS' biggest challenges, as observed by the Ombudsman during visits to field and service center offices during the reporting period.

1.   Field Offices/Service Centers

Ineffective coordination and communication between field offices and service centers continues to be a serious and pervasive problem. Offices are not standardized in how they function, and communication between offices is difficult at best. Moreover, unconnected information systems inhibit employees from getting the information in a timely way to resolve issues and adjudicate cases. Lack of timely information inevitably causes processing delays and customer dissatisfaction. For example, each of the four service centers and the NBC continue to operate separate computer Local Area Network (LAN) systems with no connectivity to each other. Applicants file employment-based green card applications with one of two service centers, which forward applications requiring interviews to field offices nationwide. The field offices do not have access to the service center's LAN system and, therefore, cannot: (1) update the LAN record with case completion information; or (2) connect to the LAN system to produce the green card. The field office must return the paper file to the service center to complete these tasks.

The investment must be made to equip all offices with the tools necessary to well serve the public. For example, the Ombudsman has suggested numerous times that USCIS establish telephone-based direct link connections into the LAN at field offices to allow them to do the