

**Notes for Stakeholder Meeting with USCIS at Albuquerque Field Office**  
**Thursday, December 16, 2021, at 10:00 a.m.**

**Jesse Mendez, Deputy Director for District 31**  
**Michael C. Smith, USCIS Field Office Director for Albuquerque**  
**Lance Lennick, Supervisory Immigration Services Officer**  
**Mary K. Herrmann, Overview and Update Regarding USCIS Contact Center**  
**Juan M. Moran, Community Relations Officer for District 31**

**Questions Regarding Staffing**

1. Could you please provide us with a current list of Albuquerque Field Office personnel, including directors, supervisors, ISOs, and FDNS officers? We have seen a lot of new faces at USCIS, and it would be helpful to provide an overview of new hires and future plans for staffing now that the hiring freeze has been lifted.

**District 31 Leadership:**

- Sarah Kendall, Regional Director (Irving, TX)
- Mario Ortiz, District Director (San Antonio, TX)
- Jesse Mendez, Deputy Director (San Antonio, TX)

**Albuquerque Field Office (ABQ):**

- Michael C. Smith, Field Office Director (FOD)
- Jackie Puccetti, Supervisory Immigration Services Officer
- Lance Lennick, Supervisory Immigration Services Officer

**Staffing Update**

- Office is now at 83% staffing capacity
  - 3 New Officers, 2 Officers Left, and 2 will be hired soon
  - A few other internal positions were filled
  - New Supervisor, Lance Lennick
2. What are the duties of various personnel at USCIS, including supervisors? USCIS did not provide details regarding this question.

**Mary K. Herrmann, Overview and Answers to Questions Regarding USCIS Contact Center**

**A Year in USCIS (FY21 Data)**

- In-person Appointments – 211,000
- Calls received at the Contact Center = 14.6 million

- Questions asked to Emma = 12 million
- Live Chat = 852,000
- NOTE: 160 total officers at the Contact Center to respond to all of these contacts

### Engaging With the USCIS Contact Center

- Tier 0: Self Help Channels
  - Online tools
- Tier 1: USCIS Contact Center
  - Contract Vendor at 3 sites
  - Phone, Live Chat
- Tier 2: USCIS Contact Center
  - East (NYC), Midwest (OPK), West (LA)
  - Phone and secure messaging
- Tier 3: USCIS Contact Center
  - More complex cases and issues, some of which need liaison to local offices
  - Phone and secure messaging
- Tier 4: USCIS Contact Center (Camp Spring, MD)
  - Primarily written correspondence from USCIS leadership, Office of Civil Rights and Liberties, Ombudsman, or even the White House

### General Inquiry Flow

- Applicant calls 800 Number, is first offered self-help tools, then if Interactive Voice Response (IVR) System identifies need, speaks to live representative
- If escalation to live agent is appropriate, Tier 1 performs triage
  - If caller requests appointment,
    - Escalate to Tier 2
    - If Tier 2 validates the need for appointment, Tier 2 schedules appointment
    - Tier 2 escalates issue if imminent
  - If caller needs something else
    - Tier 1 resolves or escalates to Tier 2
    - Tier 2 resolves or escalates to Tier 3
    - Inquiry closed
- Notes on General Inquiry Flow
  - USCIS has changed inquiry flow. USCIS used to have a set number of inquiries they could take at tier 2 on a daily basis, which disproportionately affected the West Coast since they had to stop at 1pm EST
  - Now, when Tier 1 escalates to Tier 2, the inquiry goes into a queue and then they manually call back.
  - First speak through IVR, then first level of live assistance for triage regarding the inquiry. For example, if a person needs an appointment, that inquiry is escalated to Tier 2 in order to determine appointment is needed or escalate further.
  - If anything other than an appointment, a similar process happens where Tier 1 tries to resolve and if can't resolve, sends inquiry to Tier 2, where Tier 2 will resolve or escalate.

## **2020 Interactive Voice Response (IVR) System**

- In 2020, USCIS replaced menu options with intelligent assistant (or Interactive Voice Response System)
- Callers say what they need out loud in English or Spanish
- Refinement is ongoing
- IVR gives case status, sends links via email and text
- IVR transfers to live service to certain scenarios

## **Contact Center Call Backs**

- Urgent Inquiries: 24 to 72 hour response time, usually within 24 hours
- Non-urgent inquiries: 30-day response time
- Text and email notification 1-2 days in advance
- USCIS makes two callback attempts
- If on first try USCIS is unable to reach customer, USCIS leaves a message and calls back again after 60-90 minutes. USCIS is considering a change in procedures to try to help if people miss the call to not have to start completely over.

## **Contact Center Call Backs**

- Contact hours: 7am – 6:30pm Eastern
- Phone number in caller ID is 202 area code
- Representatives: USCIS can take multiple phone numbers in case callback happens outside normal business hours
- Future options, possibly in FY 22, include a “true” text ahead feature and scheduled call backs

## **Appointments**

- 3-4% of inquiries require an appointment
- Non-urgent appointments are scheduled as slots are available
- Urgent appointment requests are reviewed individually and prioritized
- Reasons for urgent appointments:
  - Family emergency requiring travel
  - Medical emergency
  - Finance related issues such as loss of employment

## **Questions re USCIS Contact Center**

- Issues with long hold times and issues getting through to a live person? What are current wait times and are there any plans for increased staffing to alleviate long wait times?
  - Tier 1 level of service is through a contractor, and contractor is aggressively hiring to get staffed up. For the last 2 months, it has been markedly better. Average wait time under 2 minutes in December. Experience seasonal low around holidays.

- Tier 2 level: For inquiries that require a call back in Tier 2, they are also in the process of bringing on more officers, after staffing for adjudicating units
- Is USCIS considering allowing scheduling appointments online again like they did in the past for a short time?
  - USCIS did a pilot on that, but the issue was that routed directly to Tier 2. Some level of validation is still needed. Long-term, would love to see some of that happen through USCIS accounts.
- What about routing some types of inquiries to local office, i.e. questions about rescheduling oath ceremonies? Is there any discussion about bringing back email boxes at local field offices for local issues?
  - There are some questions going on within the agency about if there is way to do that or if different way to escalate those issues. There are discussions about that, but she doesn't know the way that is going to go.

### **General Slides and Guidelines – FOD Michael Smith**

- **Who Can Accompany a Visitor to a USCIS Facility?**
  - To limit the number of people in the waiting room, applicants with scheduled appointments may only be accompanied by:
    - Attorneys and authorized representatives
    - Interpreters (in some cases interpreters will be asked to be available by phone)
    - Parents, legal guardians or trusted adults, if the applicant being interviewed is a minor
    - Immediate family members listed as dependents on the asylum application or interview notice; and
    - An individual helping a person with disabilities
- **General Guidelines for Entering USCIS Facilities**
  - Visitors will be screened before they enter a USCIS facility. If they answer YES to any of the FOUR screening questions or refuse to wear a face covering or mask in accordance with USCIS policy, they will not be allowed to enter a USCIS facility.
  - There will be markings and physical barriers in the facility; visitors should pay close attention to these signs to ensure they follow social distancing guidelines.
  - Applicants and visitors may also have to answer health screening questions before entering a facility.
  - Applicants and visitors are encouraged to bring their own pens.
- **Albuquerque Language Services**
  - USCIS recommends that applicants requiring an interpreter bring one with them to help expedite the process.
  - While the officers can use a language service to provide service to limited English proficient customers, it is difficult to find interpreters timely and may cause delays in the process.
  - USCIS will provide an interpreter only when required by law. Therefore, if necessary, applicants must provide their own interpreter. *The Rule and Use of Interpreters in Domestic Field Office Interviews*, PM 602-0125.1.

- **InfoPass Appointments**
  - 10-15/day, usually have appts open
- **Interviews:**
  - N-400 applications typically handled by two officers/day
  - I-485 applications: Right now, USCIS does not have huge numbers of I-485 interviews. USCIS has new employees and is trying to make sure they are trained properly.
  - By February, expect number of interviews to increase quite a bit.
- **Ceremonies**
  - Administrative ceremonies by USCIS
    - Limiting guests to parties involved
  - Judicial ceremonies
    - The district court decides if guests are allowed.
    - The district court cancelled the convention center ceremony for January, so if they do have a judicial ceremony, it would be off-site.
- **Albuquerque Field Office Processing Times**
  - Overall, Albuquerque is ahead of national processing times, and processing times will continue to improve in the next few months as new officers are trained.
  - Graphs show I-485 processing times in 2021 ranging from 7.8 to 10.91 on average, with 7.8 in November
  - Graphs show N-400 processing times in 2021 ranging from 6.06 to 9.38 months, with 6.32 months in December.
- **Albuquerque Field Office Efficiency**
  - Albuquerque efficiency ratings are typically through the roof
  - In October, Albuquerque had efficiency of 156% when evaluated against goals
  - In November, Albuquerque had efficiency of 83% (that went down due to training)
  - Expect by Feb/March/Apr to return to normal efficiency
- **Staffing Update**
  - Office is now at 83% staffing capacity
  - 3 New Officers, 2 Officers Left, and 2 will be hired soon
  - A few other internal positions were filled
  - New Supervisor, Lance Lennick
- **Role of Representatives in the Interview**
  - See USCIS Adjudicator Field Manual 12.4, Interviews.  
<https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/policy-manual-afm/afm12-external.pdf>
  - The role of the representative at an interview is to ensure that the rights of the individuals he or she represents are protected.
  - An attorney or representative may not respond to questions the USCIS officer directs to the applicant, petitioner, or witness, except to ask the USCIS officer to clarify the question asked. An attorney or representative may ask the applicant or petitioner additional questions at the conclusion of the interview by the officer.

## Responses to Questions from Lance Lennick

*NOTE: We were a bit short on time after all the general updates, and Mr. Lennick went over these questions very quickly and categorized responses to questions.*

### Questions Regarding Interviews

3. What are the plans for the pilot program for virtual interviews and new construction of offices for virtual interviews in the Albuquerque Field Office? Which types of cases are anticipated to be selected for virtual interviews and what officers are conducting virtual interviews? Many practitioners have reported that in-person interviews are highly preferable due to the ability to communicate better and ease some of the anxiety of the interview process!

The construction of new offices for virtual interviews in Albuquerque is to provide a safe place to minimize contact between applicants and officers.

4. Now that construction has been completed for virtual interviewing offices, will any interviews take place in the old lobby area? Is the Field Office applying protocols to ensure applicants are not interviewing in front of other people in the waiting area?

Officers will interview applicants in new offices, and the lobby area is transitioning back to check-in and InfoPass.

5. Why are interviews being scheduled at the local office if applicants' permanent files have not been shipped to Albuquerque? We have seen significant delays with several of our clients that go to interview but then have to wait several months before receiving a final decision simply because their entire alien file has not arrived. Is there a way to push the processing centers to send permanent files?

It is rare for officers not to have the file at the time of the interview. Where the file is not there, there have been delays in file requests nationally, and Albuquerque has to wait for the files to adjudicate the application. Delays are due to staffing shortages across USCIS, not just Albuquerque.

6. How does USCIS plan to accommodate disabled clients who need at-home interviews or remote interviews because they cannot appear in person? We understand that COVID restrictions are still in place, however applicants with pending applications should be reasonably accommodated regardless.

USCIS is looking into resuming home interviews within the next 3 months and will provide more info in next 3 months. USCIS needs processes for checking facilities for safety and PPP.

7. What is the Albuquerque Field Office's policy for interpreters during interviews? Do you request that applicants provide their own interpreters, and if so, do you prefer they appear in person or over the phone? Requiring that applicants provide an interpreter is a significant barrier to some applicants who cannot afford hiring an interpreter.

See slide regarding interpretation.

8. What are the field office's current COVID protocols, especially during interviews? How is the field office preventing unnecessary separation of applicants and petitioners during interviews, especially if an interpreter is also present in person?

See general slides regarding COVID guidelines and interviews.

9. Under what circumstances would an applicant be arrested at a USCIS interview, and when are federal, state, or local law enforcement agencies contacted regarding an applicant? Will applicants be advised of issues or any outstanding warrants in advance of the interview? Will USCIS conduct the interview and proceed with adjudication of the benefits application?

USCIS missed this question but when asked, provided the following clarification to questions: USCIS must exercise due diligence and is required to notify law enforcement if active warrant. USCIS will only assist local law enforcement if requested. USCIS role is to adjudicate benefits without causing delay. USCIS will reach out to law enforcement regarding warrant, and if no longer active, USCIS does not take further action.

### **Questions Regarding Military Parole in Place Applications**

10. What are the current processing times for military PIP?
11. Who is currently adjudicating Military PIP applications?
12. What should applicants expect regarding Military PIP applications? Will they receive a receipt notice? Biometrics Appointment Notice?
13. Practitioners are reporting Military PIP applications that have been pending since Summer 2021 without a receipt notice or biometrics notice. What can we do to confirm that those applications are being processed, or do we need to resubmit them?

Normal processing is about 4 months, but processing times can sometimes be longer due to biometrics and scheduling. Military PIP applications are scheduled for biometrics.

Processing of military PIP applications is now resuming after some staffing changes. When asked about how to check if applications had been lost, USCIS indicated that if we do not hear anything in the next several weeks, we can inquire with the 1-800 number or via correspondence to the local field office.

### **Questions Regarding Emergency Advance Parole and Requests for Humanitarian Parole or Deferred Action**

14. Would you please explain the process for emergency advance parole requests? Where is the I-131 filed, and is the local office accepting emergency I-131 applications for advance

parole? Note for Practitioners: Please see general guidelines at the following link: <https://www.uscis.gov/green-card/green-card-processes-and-procedures/travel-documents/emergency-travel>

Call the USCIS Contact Center to initiate the process. USCIS has guidance on the website for requirements.

15. Is the local office accepting applications for humanitarian parole or humanitarian deferred action, and what is the process for requesting humanitarian parole or humanitarian deferred action?

USCIS has no guidelines for humanitarian deferred action. The processing would likely be along the same lines as for Military PIP.

16. What is the best way to schedule an emergency appointment or proceed with an emergency advance parole or humanitarian parole application? What documentation is required by the local office to show that it is an urgent matter for advance parole or humanitarian parole?

See notes above regarding calling the USCIS Contact Center and checking requirements on the USCIS website.

17. When is a fee required for emergency advance parole requests? Notably, some applications where advance parole is requested are not required to pay a fee for the I-131 based on a pending I-485 application.

A fee is required for emergency advance parole requests even if an Applicant already has a pending I-131 based on a pending I-485 application. Emergency advance parole requests require filing a new I-131 application at the local office.

18. If a fee is required, what forms of payment does the local office accept for emergency advance parole?

USCIS Albuquerque accepts payment by credit card or check only. Money orders and cashier's checks are no longer allowed.

19. For emergency advance parole requests, one issue that has arisen is regarding if biometrics need to be completed prior to the emergency parole being issued. Are biometrics required, and if so, will the local office also schedule emergency biometrics appointments?

USCIS did not directly respond to this question and provided general guidance above.

### **Questions Regarding Oath Ceremonies**

20. Are family members or friends allowed to attend naturalization ceremonies?



See notes above regarding ceremonies and guests. The general policy currently is no guests since they are trying to have as many applicants as possible at the ceremonies.

21. What is the best process for rescheduling naturalization ceremonies and obtaining confirmation of rescheduling? The USCIS Contact Center has indicated that naturalization ceremonies need to be rescheduled via requests to the local Field Office. How should we submit requests for rescheduling, and can the local Field Office confirm that rescheduling is in process?

If an oath ceremony needs to be rescheduled, applicants can call the USCIS Contact Center or use the drop-off box in the lobby or mail to communicate directly with the local office.

22. Will the local field office automatically reschedule the oath ceremony the first time if a ceremony is missed similarly to the current policy regarding biometrics appointments? Practitioners have reported significant barriers to seeking to reschedule oath ceremonies through the USCIS Contact Center, and we have not received a response to requests to reschedule through the local office.

If an oath ceremony is missed, USCIS will reschedule one time. If an applicant does not attend the oath ceremony, the case will be administratively closed.

23. Are interpreters now required for oath ceremonies? We have started receiving notices of oath ceremonies with a form for an interpreter to fill out to be on call during the oath ceremony. When did this procedure begin? Are certain languages exempt from this requirement (e.g. if someone speaks Spanish is there still a requirement to provide an interpreter for the ceremony?).

USCIS is not sure about what the notices say regarding interpreters and does not have information regarding any changes regarding interpretation at oath ceremonies.

### **Questions Regarding Biometrics and ASC**

24. We have seen many delays during the pandemic related to applications requiring biometrics. Could you please provide an update regarding the current backlog for biometrics in Albuquerque?

Biometrics delays are improving.

25. Is there a way to expedite biometrics in extraordinary cases? The USCIS Contact Center generally will not accept an expedite request until AFTER biometrics have been completed, which is one of the major sources of delays.

Call USCIS Contact Center, and if they cannot help, reach out to local office via dropbox or mail.

26. What is the best way to contact the local ASC directly? In a situation where a client misplaced an item or needs to check the lost and found at the ASC, is there a way to reach out without going in person to the ASC location?

There is no public phone number for the local ASC. The best way to check regarding misplaced items is to go back to ASC in person to see if the item is there.

### **General Questions Regarding Case Processing**

27. If we plan on filing mandamus pleadings, would the Albuquerque Field Office like notice beforehand or can we proceed to file? If you would like notice, how and where would you like to receive notice, especially in cases where other methods of communication with the USCIS Contact Center and Field Office have been ineffective.

The Albuquerque Field Office appreciates being notified in advance of the filing of litigation. If you would like to send notice of intended litigation, please email [Christine.lyman@usdoj.gov](mailto:Christine.lyman@usdoj.gov) who will coordinate with USCIS counsel.

### **Policy Questions**

28. What is the new policy regarding responses to policy questions? Specifically, we are very curious regarding whether national or local USCIS is considering a change in policy regarding when applicants may wait out the 212(a)(9)(B) bar in the US, and are happy to re-send a memo regarding arguments to that effect.

General USCIS policy questions should go through the AILA representative to USCIS HQ in DC.

USCIS will continue to have quarterly stakeholder meetings in Albuquerque.