

USCIS / Legal Service Provider Meeting Questions
San Antonio Field Office
February 18, 2022
10 AM
In-Person & Virtual Meeting

Tina Almond was very specific about not allowing recording of the meeting or screenshots of the power point slides. These notes are not verbatim or exhaustive but are the best compilation of the notes of three attorneys; thank you Bernardo Gonzalez and Valeria Guerra. If you see an inaccuracy, first, I apologize, and second, please report to me (Amy Thomas).

Tina Almond encourages more in-person attendance for the next liaison meeting. Honestly, being able to speak in person before and after the meeting with the SAFO staff in attendance was great.

**SAFO staff attending the meeting: Field Office Director Tina Almond, Section Chief Julia Benavidez, Supervisors Alex Nerdin & Rakia Johnson.

- 1. Are there any general updates for the San Antonio Field Office? Will you give us an update about officers who have left the SAFO and new officers who have started and/or will be starting?**

SUPERVISORS UPDATE:

- ~ Rakia Johnson – New Supervisor (she’s been at SAFO a few months and came from Harlingen)
- ~ New Supervisor has been selected and will be starting soon
- ~ Laurie Perez is no longer a Supervisor as she has been promoted to a different role at the District-level

NEW OFFICERS:

- ~ Gabby
- ~ Yolanda
- ~ Yolanda
- ~ Beatriz
- ~ Gregory Potts

GENERAL UPDATES:

- ~ Health and safety are a top priority. Masks are still mandated (social distancing and plexiglass screens also remain).
- ~ Attorney phone representation is still permitted for interviews (notify supervisor if there is an issue with this).
- ~ SAFO staffing is at 82%. Most of the losses are in the clerical area, so ISOs are volunteering to assist. Some clerical staff have moved to ISO positions. Federal hiring is a slow, but it is in process.
- ~ Production has increased as of January. Currently, SAFO is interviewing 1800-2000 naturalization applicants and 600 I-485 applicants per month. Some/most employment-based

AOS cases are being granted interview waiver. Recently, about 1000 refugee & asylum-based AOS cases were adjudicated.

~ Employment-based I-485s are the #1 priority. This is from the Field Office Directorate.

~ USCIS is looking to expand family-based interview waivers; there are a couple of pilot programs happening now. Interview waiver cases give more available telework and increase efficiency.

~ USCIS and SAFO FOD are committed to lowering the cycle time to 6 months by end of FY2023. Tina Almond aspires to get SAFO to this goal early to be able to assist other field offices in reaching the goal.

~ SAFO is focused on the age of the case (not the time at the SAFO) to reduce the cycle time.

~ FOD highly encourages I-485 applicants to come to the interview with sealed medical exams (to avoid delay of RFE).

~ Responding to RFEs by uploading evidence to myUSCIS account would be efficient and quick. SAFO took note on attorney feedback that existing cases (that were not submitted online) cannot be linked in attorney account. Feedback will be given to the developers working on the online accounts.

2. Does the SAFO foresee any changes to customer service options?

No. If serious, egregious, or emergency situations arise, contact the FOD. Her email address is Tina.M.Almond@uscis.dhs.gov . Having more ISOs at InfoPass windows would mean less case adjudications.

3. Are any large Oath Ceremonies at a venue outside of the San Antonio Field Office being scheduled or planned yet? At the last liaison meeting, it was announced that the SAFO was talking to venues.

~ On March 8, 2022, SAFO is hosting a 100-female ceremony in commemoration of International Women's Day at San Antonio City Hall.

~ On March 11 and 15, SAFO will host ceremonies at Twin Oaks Library in Austin, Texas.

~ A large Austin ceremony is being planned for National Parks Week.

~ A large Austin ceremony is being planned for Constitution Day.

~ Courts have indicated readiness to resume ceremonies in May 2022 per Judge Rodriguez.

4. Has the Omicron variant affected any of the SAFO case processing (number of interviews being conducted per week, COVID protocols, etc.)?

No. However, staff in the office is at 60-65% on any given day because of COVID precautions in place. Additional staff are working from home.

5. Are interviews being allowed to proceed where an Applicant has perceived COVID symptoms (coughing)? Would it be helpful for the Applicant to bring proof of a recent negative COVID test?

Regardless of a negative test, any person (applicant, attorney, or employee) with COVID symptoms is not permitted in the building. Interviews are normally rescheduled within 30-45

days. Call the Contact Center as soon as possible to report the COVID symptoms and request that the interview be rescheduled. There are officers tasked with daily monitoring of the messages that come to the SAFO this way.

6. Is there a reason that an Officer would object to the scope of a G-28 being “All Immigration Matters” instead of listing the form numbers on p.2 (#1b)?

Form instructions should be followed; a list of the forms that the G-28 covers is required.

7. Can you give an update on the services that the Austin ASC office provides? Are emergency walk-in appointments available at the Austin ASC office?

~ Both Austin and San Antonio ASC only perform biometric services. All ASCs are contract sites.

~ ASCs are not taking walk-ins; only scheduled appointments are being seen.

~ Homebound biometrics capture (as well as interviews) is now happening again.

**Update since Liaison meeting from FOD: she was sent confirmation that some Austin zip codes have been remapped to San Antonio ASC because of backlog waiting for Austin ASC. Austin applicants who are scheduled in San Antonio should make every effort to attend the biometrics appointment, and if unable to do so they should call the Contact Center.

8. How long does it take for an I-601 (in response to a Request for Evidence by the SAFO) that is filed with the lockbox with the filing fee take to be received at the SAFO? Does this arrive to the SAFO in electronic form or on paper as it was submitted?

~ Each waiver filing is accepted & reviewed by USCIS lockbox before being sent to NBC for review and routing.

~ There is no set time for arrivals, but most filings are received at the SAFO within 45-60 days.

~ Do not send a duplicate copy to the SAFO as this causes a clerical burden on the SAFO staff. They are checking RFEs by due date to look for I-601 submission and are shelving ones where I-601 has been submitted.

9. Is the ASC office in San Antonio still accepting walk-ins on a case-by-case basis where the Applicant cannot attend the biometrics appointment on the scheduled day (illness, travel, notice received late, etc.)?

Neither San Antonio nor Austin ASC is accepting walk-ins now. The issue of late notices has been raised up the chain of command.

10. Will you give an update on Naturalization Oath Ceremonies being conducted throughout the SAFO jurisdiction? Can you give an update for ceremonies for Corpus Christi, Laredo, San Angelo, Del Rio, and College Station?

~ Laredo will host a ceremony on May 6, 2022.

- ~ Corpus Christi will host a ceremony on March 4, 2022.
- ~ College Station will host a ceremony on May 5, 2022.
- ~ A Del Rio ceremony is currently being scheduled (in San Antonio).
- ~ San Antonio ceremonies are usually M-W (on days when naturalization applicants are interviewed) and on Fridays.

11. At the last liaison meeting, there was an explanation that the long delays for some interviews (primarily N-400s but also AOS cases) were related to an inability to get physical A-files for interviews. Is it true that these files are stored in underground man-made caves and the files are not readily obtainable because the staff is still operating at no more than 25% of capacity? Can you please give an update? Do you have any helpful recommended action that Legal Service Providers can take on these cases? Would filing a duplicate N-400 packet with the Receipt Notice help to unstick these cases filed between 2019 and early 2020?

- ~ Yes, some A-Files are literally being stored in man-made caves. Federal Record Centers (FRCs), run by National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), house some A-files that were not expected to be needed for near-term adjudication. Prior to COVID, there was close to a zero backlog to get these files. Since 3/2020, files are not being transferred to NARA. NARA's staffing remains at 25%.
- ~ This issue has been raised & is being addressed at HQ level. NBC sent staff to pull files for NARA, so hopefully, there will be some additional cases from this effort soon.
- ~ Per regulation, the A-file is required for N-400 adjudication. Providing a duplicate N-400 packet will not help (and will only create clerical work at the field office).
- ~ USCIS is committed to future modernization.

12. What is the status of rescheduling the canceled interview appointments and oath ceremonies (recent weather days)?

These are being rescheduled as soon as times are available. All should be rescheduled within 35-60 days.

13. What is the average adjudication time for military parole in place requests?

About 10 months after filing.

14. What is the average adjudication time for humanitarian parole requests?

About 6-10 months after filing.

15. Can you please clarify USCIS's procedure for issuing paroles to Cubans present in the US? Has local policy changed regarding USCIS issuance of I-94s to Cubans so that they may adjust under the CAA (1966)?

USCIS has not issued initial paroles for Cubans since 1/2017.

16. Can the SAFO provide a work around to give extensions where an applicant timely filed an I-765 extension, but the 180-day automatic extension has passed without the new EAD being received? Is this an appropriate reason to get an InfoPass appointment, and if so what form would the extension take? (Ex. Applicant in proceedings, under category (c)(10) cancellation application pending with IJ, who filed a Form I-765 with USCIS, and received an automatic 180-day extension of their expiring card.)

The Field Office cannot do this; contacting the Service Center is recommended.

17. Is the SAFO issuing decisions on any non-military Deferred Actions Requests? An attorney reports having several of these pending for between 1 and 5 years. The attorney reports that he has received RFEs asking for updated medical documentation, but a decision was still not received after the RFE response. What would be the best way to follow up on these cases? He has already corresponded with the SAFO.

Yes, USCIS handles humanitarian deferred action requests. However, there are cases that are a higher priority for the Field Office. There is an officer handling these and humanitarian parole requests now.

18. Will you give an update on the Section Chiefs? Who is leading which sections (and email addresses if these may be used directly in certain circumstances)? Will you give an update on the current Supervisors?

Tina.M.Almond@uscis.dhs.gov (Field Office Director)
Julia.A.Benavidez@uscis.dhs.gov (I-Forms Chief)
Michelle.R.Montgomery@uscis.dhs.gov (N-Forms Chief)
Christobal.Saucedo@uscis.dhs.gov (Records and Support)
Juan.M.Moran@uscis.dhs.gov (Community Relations)
SNA-EOIR-AOS@uscis.dhs.gov (EOIR terminations mailbox)

19. For adjustment cases where OPLA grants the respondent's prosecutorial discretion request to adjust before USCIS, what is SAFO's procedure for processing those cases? Is it helpful for a Legal Service Provider to mail a complete duplicate package to SAFO? Is there a specific unit or person handling these? What is the normal time for transfer of these? What action can the Legal Service Provider take when the process exceeds that normal transfer time?

~ See previously sent out Instruction Sheet dated 2/9/2022. UPDATE: only the IJ Decision and the G-28 should be attached to the email. A duplicate copy of the I-485 packet should not be attached to the email. The San Antonio Field Office may request additional documents, or the additional supporting documents can be brought to a scheduled interview.

~ A meeting with OPLA has been scheduled; terminations are likely to increase because of the OPLA priority of reducing the backlog. This mailbox is an effort to reduce frustration and timely adjudicate these cases.

~ Email should ONLY be used for this specific circumstance.

20. When determining scheduling of interviews during peak holiday times (week of Thanksgiving, first business day after a holiday), does the SAFO decrease the number of interviews scheduled considering many officers are out? Legal Service Providers have reported waiting for interviews for up to 3 hours.

The SAFO was doing the best it could, but the past holidays coincided with Omicron (and more officers were out because of illness). The SAFO called in additional resources. Wait times are being monitored. If wait is ever over 1 hour, the attorney is encouraged to speak to the Supervisor.

21. Some field offices notify applicants/attorneys when a Stokes interview will be conducted. Is this a policy that the SAFO would entertain?

This Stokes interview process is only applicable to the New York City area field offices. There will be no advance notice at the SAFO that there will be a Stokes interview.

22. Is there a time limit on how long an officer can review a file prior to conducting an interview? Can you give some information on the flow of interviews from time of check-in (anticipated time to get file to ISO, average review time, average or range of normal interview times)?

File review is built into interview time. Files are assigned an officer based on check-in time. Several factors impact the length of time for file review: file volume, derogatory information, potential ineligibility, etc.

23. Are officers aware that attorneys may sit next to their clients during interviews? (This seems to be coming up again with some Officers.) AFM 15.2(a)

~ Yes, officers should be aware of this. Sometimes safety considerations and CDC guidance are the reasons for asking the attorney to sit behind client on a case-by-case basis.

~ If dealing with an officer “being authoritative” or for other problems experienced with an officer, request to speak to the Supervisor THAT DAY.

24. Is there a policy/practice guiding the advice that Officers can/should give about name changes at naturalization? An attorney reports that an Officer was very persistent in trying to sway an Applicant to refrain from a name change. The Applicant indicated the request for name change on the N-400 and again verbally at the interview.

~ This should always be the Applicant’s decision. Officers should not encourage or discourage an applicant from making a request for a name change.

~ Issues like this should be raised to the Supervisor.

25. Are attorneys not permitted to use their phones during interviews for business/informational purposes? (Example: verifying the law.) If so, should the Legal Service Provider ask for permission first?

Per policy manual, mobile devices should be turned off.

Additional answers given to questions that were not submitted in advance:

The current Supervisors are: Alexander Nerdin, Rakia Johnson, Santiago Santos, Aaron Garza, and Patti Torres. Richard Shelfo is currently an Acting Supervisor. A new Supervisor will be announced & begin soon.

Where N-400 is long-pending because of the A-file issue and the LPR card expired, the permanent resident can get an ADIT stamp in the passport. Advised to keep saying “ADIT stamp needed” when calling the Contact Center. Feedback will be forwarded to the Contact Center about the difficulty in getting InfoPass appointment in this situation.

SAFO has 20 InfoPass slots a day, and it is rare that they are all full.

Issue that DPS will not renew a driver’s license or ID where a digit is missing on the Naturalization Certificate. The SAFO will attempt to resolve this issue and will give attorneys an update.

Applicants can bring their own interpreters. The officer has authority to determine if an interpreter is qualified. The Supervisor would make the final decision.

NATIONAL CONTACT CENTER PRESENTATION

GENERAL:

- In 2021, the NCC received over 14.6 million calls and over 12 million questions. 211,000 in-person appointments were scheduled.

TIERS:

- Tier 0 → Self-help (interactive and online)
- Tier 1 → Contract specialists (c.500 people). Answer general and case-specific questions.
- Tier 2 → ISOs answer case-specific questions. Sometimes they reach out to Service Center or Field Office. Will schedule in-person (InfoPass) appointment if determination is made that this is needed.
- Tier 3 → Service Center or Field Office assistance.
- Tier 4 → Congressional inquiries handled.

IVR System:

- 2020 they adopted an intelligent assistant
 - Provides case status
 - Sends links via text/email
 - Transfers to live assistants

CALL BACKS:

- Urgent inquiries → 72-hour response
- Non-urgent inquiries → 30-days response
- Text and email notifications → 1-2 days in advanced (new!)
- NCC gives two call-back attempts
 - If not reached the first time, a message is left and there is another call back 60-90 minutes later.
- For 2022, they are trying to implement feature that allows callers to schedule call-backs
 - True text
- Hours are from 7:00 AM to 6:30 PM EST and area code for call backs is 202.
- Can provide multiple phone numbers for call-backs.

APPOINTMENTS:

- 3-4% of inquiries require an appointment
- Non-urgent situations are scheduled as slots are available & urgent ones are reviewed individually and prioritized.

UNUSUAL SITUATIONS:

- Feedback was given that this is the area where there seem to be “breakdowns”. Presenters advised that this feedback would be considered, but the tier process must be followed to get to escalation.

WEBSITE:

- www.uscis.gov/contactcenter