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Change in Visa Paperwork Stalls 10,000 Trips to the Altar

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON, June 17 (AP) — Wedding plans have been delayed for 10,000 American citizens seeking visas for their foreign brides and grooms as the Homeland Security Department works on new paperwork for their applications.

The form change was required as part of a law, enacted in March, to protect foreign mail-order brides from abusive American spouses. But Homeland Security missed a deadline three months ago, putting the visa applications of thousands of law-abiding couples in limbo.

The department said this week that it would send out additional forms to the visa seekers for more information that should satisfy the new law's protections.

But the bureaucratic entanglement has halted wedding plans for many couples.

"We were ready to get married this year, but I can't really make a date until we get the approval," said Bill Hall, 41, a construction foreman from Burlington, Vt. He applied two months ago for a visa for his fiancée, to emigrate from Canada with her two sons.

"We're just kind of here, in limbo," Mr. Hall said. "And it's kind of aggravating — it's a real simple thing they have to do, and they're making more of it than they need to."

He said his application, sent to Homeland Security in April, "never got approved. It's just sitting there."

All sides agree that the new law is a well-intentioned effort to protect women.

Spurred by stories of mail-order brides — largely from Eastern Europe and Asia — being abused by their American husbands, Congress approved new protections for the women in December.

The protections included amending the application form for visas to ask if the romance was arranged by an international marriage broker, and if the American citizen had ever been accused of a violent crime or convicted of three or more alcohol- or drug-related crimes.

President Bush signed the law in January, putting Homeland Security under order to draw up the new paperwork. But the forms were not finished by March 6, when the law took effect, resulting in the department shelving all spousal visa applications written on the old forms that were received after that date.

Chris Bentley, a Homeland Security spokesman, said about 10,000 applications were currently being held because they did not address the criminal or marriage-broker issues.

"They did not have all of the information needed to determine whether someone qualified or not," said Mr. Bentley, who works for the department's Citizenship and Immigration Services.

He added, "It's certainly an inconvenience brought about by the new requirements of the law."

Homeland Security said it would send additional forms to the 10,000 couples to get answers to the new questions.

Senator Maria Cantwell, Democrat of Washington, criticized Homeland Security this week as getting cold feet about quickly processing the new regulations that she helped write.

"Security and safety should be their top consideration, but their long visa process delays are putting a lot of people's lives on hold," Ms. Cantwell said in a statement.

Mr. Hall said he was frustrated with the visa delays for people trying to follow the law at a time when the Bush administration is grappling with giving other benefits to illegal immigrants.

"I thought it was ironic," Mr. Hall said. "And I find it unfair."