
Homeland Security delays thousands of weddings

Change in forms slows process for foreign spouses seeking visas

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- True love waits for no one -- except maybe the Homeland Security Department.

Red tape has put weddings on hold for about 10,000 U.S. citizens seeking visas for their foreign brides and grooms as the 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 its deadline three months ago, putting the visa applications of thousands of law-abiding lovers in limbo.

The department said Tuesday 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 trashed wedding plans for many couples before they could get anywhere near the altar.

"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, Vermont. He applied two months ago for a visa for his fiancée, Debbie, to emigrate from Canada with her two sons. In separate interviews, the couple said they have been dating for six years.

"We're just kind of here, in limbo," 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."

The tale of these 10,000 belated nuptials illustrates a bureaucratic response to what all sides agree is a well-intentioned law to protect women.

Advocates estimate that as many as 15,000 foreign women annually meet their American husbands through for-profit marriage brokers. That number, provided by the Virginia-based Tahirih Justice Center, marks a sharp rise from a 1999 estimate by the former Immigration and Naturalization Services of 30,000 women who came to the United States through a marriage broker during the previous five years.

Spurred by stories of foreign women -- largely from Eastern Europe and Asia -- being abused or even murdered by their American husbands, Congress in December approved new protections for mail-order brides. They included amending the application form for fiancée visas with two new questions: Whether the romance was arranged by an international marriage broker, and had the U.S. citizen ever been accused of a violent crime or convicted of three or more alcohol- or drug-related crimes.

President Bush signed the law on January 5, putting Homeland Security under order to draw up the new paperwork. But the forms weren't finished by March 6, when the law took effect, resulting in the department shelving all fiancée visa applications written on the old forms that

were received after that date.

Chris Bentley, a Homeland Security spokesman, said about 10,000 applications are 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 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 Tuesday it would send additional forms to the estimated 10,000 couples to get answers to the questions about criminal pasts and marriage brokers. But it said it was still waiting for the White House Office of Management and Budget for approval of those forms and the new application.

OMB spokeswoman Andrea Wuebker did not have details immediately on the additional forms, but said the new applications were approved Monday in an emergency clearance process. It was not clear when the new applications would be distributed to the public.

Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Washington, rapped Homeland Security for 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," Cantwell said in a statement.

Hall, the lovelorn Vermonter, said he's frustrated with the visa delays for people trying to follow the law at a time the Bush administration is grappling with giving other benefits to immigrants who have slipped into the U.S. illegally.

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