Immigrant Processors Fall Behind

System Overwhelmed Even Without 'Amnesty,' Guest Workers

By Spencer S. Hsu
Washington Post Staff Writer
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As the White House and Congress prepare to overhaul the nation's immigration laws, U.S. officials have concluded that they lack the technology and resources to handle the millions of applications for legal residency that could result from the changes and that several efforts to modernize computers have gone astray.

Immigration officials have said for years that it is critical to update an antiquated, paper-based application process before the government grants a new path to citizenship for as many as 12 million illegal immigrants living in the United States or creates a temporary-worker program, as senators and the Bush administration propose.

But in recent months, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) officials have determined that the troubled, $2-billion-a-year agency is unable to effectively manage its existing work, much less a flood of new applications.

A report released Dec. 20 by Homeland Security Inspector General Richard L. Skinner cited a long list of setbacks and concurred with internal USCIS reviews that the bureau "lacks the processing capacity, systems integration and project management resources needed to manage a potential increase in workloads."

A project to replace the nationwide computer network has been halted because the agency lacks $72 million to complete it. A staff reorganization was frozen because of deficiencies "that hinder day-to-day IT operations," according to the report.

USCIS is in the midst of its third major modernization effort in three years, leaving some employees confused over whether such efforts were completed or were ever begun, the report said.

Many legal immigrants already face years-long waits when they apply for green cards, often a first step toward obtaining citizenship.Another 100,000 names submitted to the FBI for background checks have been on hold for a year or more. Congressional auditors recently reported that 14 immigration offices had lost track of 111,000 files as of July.

The inspector's report noted that the agency shelved pilot programs to streamline one type of business-sponsored visa application in October and electronic processing of immigration benefits in March because of cost, timing and contracting challenges. "USCIS may be losing momentum and user confidence," the report said.

USCIS spokesman Chris Bentley said the agency had no comment beyond a written response to the report by Deputy Director Jonathan Scharfen.

"We acknowledge that we still have a great deal to do," Scharfen wrote, adding that re-engineering USCIS processes "remains a high priority." He noted that the agency has drafted new strategic and acquisition plans and hired a contractor to help.

The agency announced in September that it had cut its backlog of applications by 70 percent after a five-year, $560 million effort provided more personnel. In August, USCIS

awarded a five-year, $150 million contract to convert 55 million files into electronic form.

Private analysts said that the report revealed a broken immigration system and that by funding USCIS through user fees, Congress hobbles its ability to pay upfront for expansions or upgrades.

"Congress needs to step up and provide the funding to ensure that USCIS is able to build a functioning infrastructure, regardless of the fate of immigration reform," said Crystal Williams, deputy director of programs for the American Immigration Lawyers Association.

Congress withheld $47 million from USCIS this year pending approval of a final technology overhaul plan by Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and Congress's audit arm, the Government Accountability Office. A USCIS contractor reported the plan would cost $400 million to $1.4 billion, depending on what the agency decides it needs.