

Immigration Contractor Trims Wages

THE NEW YORK TIMES

December 2, 2007

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Workers who help process millions of visa and citizenship applications for a federal immigration agency are getting pay reductions just as the agency is facing an enormous surge in those applications.

The workers whose wage rate will be cut are contract employees in document processing centers in St. Albans, Vt., and Laguna Niguel, Calif., that are part of Citizenship and Immigration Services, the agency responsible for deciding visa applications and citizenship petitions. Some 280 of approximately 1,000 contract workers in the two centers will receive lower wages after a new contractor, Stanley Inc. of Arlington, Va., takes over tomorrow.

Immigration officials said the agency granted a contract to Stanley, after competitive bidding last year, to manage mailroom and data entry work at the two centers, in an effort to speed handling of the vast paperwork of the applications.

“The goal is to try to get this work done as efficiently as possible,” said Shawn Saucier, a spokesman for Citizenship and Immigration Services. He said the wage dispute was between the contractor and the employees and did not involve the agency.

Dozens of workers have protested the pay cuts to Vermont and California lawmakers. During the past two weeks workers picketed in front of the federal office building in Laguna Niguel.

“If you’re trying to get people motivated to deal with a huge backlog, the last thing you would do is slash pay,” said Senator Bernard Sanders, independent of Vermont, who received many calls. “It just creates more turnover, more discontent and more demoralization.”

Officials at the immigration agency said last week that they received 2.5 million applications for visas and for naturalization in July and August, more than double the applications in the same period last year. Many immigrants rushed to file applications before large fee increases took effect July 30, officials said.

Stanley announced Sept. 24 that it had won a \$225 million, three-year contract for clerical work at the two immigration centers. A previous contract, held by a consortium of companies that did not include Stanley, expired.

The new contract is based on performance and does not specify how many workers Stanley should hire. But Stanley is required to pay according to federal regulations that classify jobs and set their hourly wages.

Eric Wolking, senior vice president at Stanley, said that none of the competing companies received information during the bidding about wage levels of the current employees. Stanley only became aware of the mismatch between its proposal and current wages when managers began interviewing the workers, he said.

“When we submitted our bid, we did not know what they know about the wage scale,” said Mr. Wolking, referring to Citizenship and Immigration Services. “As we have been meeting with employees and we realized the scope of this problem, we have been making adjustments.”

Mr. Wolking said the company would offer bonuses of up to \$400 monthly to half of the workers whose wages will decrease, based on their job productivity.

The plan brought little comfort to employees whose weekly income will drop tomorrow by 12 to 20 percent.

“Everybody will be fighting over the ability for half of us to make our rent checks,” said Jeremy Murray, one of those employees, in a telephone interview. He said he had worked at the Vermont center for more than six years sorting incoming applications, making \$14.54 an hour. Starting Monday, he said, he will make \$12.84 an hour and will no longer be able to work overtime. He will lose as much as \$400 a month.

Mr. Murray said he was considering cashing out his savings plan early to avoid missing payments on his truck.

While contract employees at the centers must be American citizens and pass security clearances, they do not handle work that involves legally binding decisions on immigration applications. That work is done by federal employees, who were not affected by the wage changes. The Vermont center employs 590 federal employees and 400 contract workers. There are 570 federal employees and 620 contract workers in Laguna Niguel.

Mr. Murray said some of the guidelines for procedures he performed were 40 pages long. If applications are misfiled, he said, errors can take months or longer to fix.