

Legal Immigrants Facing a Longer Wait

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Because of an unprecedented surge in immigration applications last summer, legal immigrants will have to wait much longer during the next two years to receive visas or naturalization papers, the top official of the federal agency that issues those documents said Thursday.

In a statement before the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, the official, Emilio T. Gonzalez, the director of Citizenship and Immigration Services, said that from now until 2010 the agency would take an average of 18 months to process petitions from legal immigrants for citizenship, up from 7 months or less last year. Visas for permanent residents sponsored by relatives in the United States will take one year, up from the current average of six months or less, he said.

The announcement was awkward for Mr. Gonzalez, whose agency has long been criticized as a slow and confounding bureaucracy. In January 2007, when he announced a midyear fee increase of 66 percent for handling immigration documents, Mr. Gonzalez pledged to use the money to reduce the waiting time for naturalization to five months and for permanent resident visas to four months by the end of 2008.

He also promised that the higher fees, which took effect July 30, would allow the agency to “prevent future backlogs.”

But at the hearing on Thursday, Mr. Gonzalez said the prospect of higher fees had helped prompt a crush of more than three million applications of all types in June, July and spilling into August, a surge that he called “unprecedented in the history of immigration services of our nation.”

In June and July, he said, naturalization petitions spiked by nearly 350 percent compared with the same two months in 2006.

In the 2007 fiscal year, which ended Sept. 30, the agency received 1.4 million citizenship applications, nearly double the number in the previous fiscal year. In the past, naturalization applications dropped off soon after surges provoked by fee increases, Mr. Gonzalez said.

Under questioning from subcommittee members, Mr. Gonzalez said he could not guarantee that immigrants who applied to become citizens last summer would be naturalized in time to vote in the November elections.

“It is really going to depend on where they filed and how clean their file is,” Mr. Gonzalez said. “There are a lot of moving parts,” he said, adding, “We are working this as quickly as possible.”

He said some offices had been overwhelmed by “a deluge.” According to agency figures, 145,251 naturalization applications were received by December in Los Angeles and 94,213 in Miami.

Representative Zoe Lofgren, the California Democrat who leads the subcommittee, said she was frustrated with the waits for immigrants eager to become citizens. “We are not accepting that at this point,” she said.

Ms. Lofgren agreed with Mr. Gonzalez that delays for citizenship applicants were caused by, among other things, criminal background checks required by the F.B.I., which has a backlog of more than 300,000 such inquiries, including about 150,000 of more than six months, immigration officials said.

Jonathan Scharfen, the deputy director of the immigration agency, said the F.B.I. at one time had only 20 workers assigned to the checks, which often require manual review of paper records. The agency has since added 20 staff members and 220 contract workers to the task, Mr. Scharfen said.

By the end of last year, officials said, Citizenship and Immigration Services had sent receipt notices for all but a handful of the applications that arrived during the year. At one point last fall, the agency was struggling just to confirm that applications had been received.

Mr. Gonzalez said the agency planned to spend up to \$480 million in fees from the recent applications to hire 1,800 employees in addition to 1,500 new workers who were already being selected and trained. The immigration agency pays for its operations almost entirely from fees.

Another witness at the hearing, Rosemary Jenks, said she had “come to dread the phrase ‘backlog reduction.’ ” Ms. Jenks, the director of government relations for NumbersUSA, a group that favors reduced immigration, said previous efforts by immigration agencies to handle surges like the recent one led officials to take “risky shortcuts.”

Mr. Gonzalez said on the whole, however, that the agency viewed the surge as good news. Immigrants are “demonstrating a deep desire to participate fully in this country’s civic life,” he said.