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## Skeptics beware

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By Alice Lipowicz

## Renaud restores faith in USCIS transformation

One of the greatest hurdles Daniel Renaud faces in implementing the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services agency’s ambitious \$536 million business transformation program is skepticism within his own agency.

The doubts reflect recent history. Despite four years of effort on projects to reduce its reliance on paper records and clear its backlogs, the USCIS had made little progress toward its long-term goal of transforming from a paperwork agency to an electronic records-based agency, the Government Accountability Office concluded in a review conducted from August 2005 to February 2006.

But it was in February 2006 that Renaud, a 16-year employee at U.S. immigration agencies, was named chief of the new USCIS Transformation Office, reporting to the agency’s deputy director. Since then, he has submitted a detailed strategy and expenditure plan to Congress, identified funding, met with contractors and is preparing to release a request for proposals for a contract to support the agency’s plan.

Renaud, who meets regularly with senior Homeland Security Department officers to update them on the project, is now confident that the transformation is moving forward with momentum.

“This is one of the highest priorities at USCIS and one of the top five priorities in the Homeland Security Department,” Renaud said. “Things are moving fairly quickly now.”

USCIS plans to issue an RFP for its Business Transformation Initiative in the next few weeks. The RFP will come through DHS’ Enterprise Acquisition Gateway for Leading Edge (EAGLE) Solutions procurement vehicle.

GAO, in an updated report in July, agreed that the transformation project was now mostly on track, though more improvements are needed. "USCIS has taken initial steps to address problems identified with past efforts to modernize," GAO reported. Paperwork has been accumulating at USCIS for many years. The agency, which processes benefit claims for immigrants, refugees and other foreign residents, was part of the Immigration and Naturalization Service before that agency was split and then folded into DHS in March 2003.

With more than 7 million applications a year, USCIS' backlog grew to nearly 4 million by 2004. The agency maintains about 55 million alien files, or A-files, typically stored for 75 years.

By 2005, several test projects were under way to automate recordkeeping and digitally record the A-files. A year later, Renaud began leading efforts to transform the agency's business processes. The transformation could cost \$536 million through 2013, which will be covered by fees. In May, the agency submitted to Congress its Transformation Strategic Plan and Expenditure Plan.

Now the agency is getting busy, Renaud said, preparing the RFP and notifying EAGLE contractors to see who is interested in the \$536 million contract.

"We have a challenge out there," he said. "We have a certain amount of funding, and the question is, 'How does a vendor help us get the capability to do our job?' We need a solution to our challenge."

The agency has a high-level design for the business process, he said. To help manage the project, Renaud is planning to expand the transformation office staff, from the current 22 full-time equivalents to 40.

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"The Biometric Storage System will allow us to more easily share the biometric information with other agencies and with other DHS components," he said. "Also, it will be a big boon for customer service, because if someone loses a card, they won't have to return to collect another image. We can reuse the images that are on file."

The transformation should lower cost and increase the speed of service but "the real goal is that we want to be better. For our 16,000 employees, we need better processes. They need these tools," Renaud said.

Business managers will see more flexibility because of the transformation and greater ability to eliminate fraud and share information, he said.

The USCIS included the Temporary Workers Program in its strategic plan, but the legislation that would have created the program failed in Congress. However, Renaud said the lack of congressional support changes little about the strategy. “The executive support we have had has not waned since this summer,” he said. “If anything, it has intensified. We have an urgent need to modernize. Doing this work will better prepare us for a guest worker program if it happens.”

However, Renaud still faces skepticism from his agency employees, who feel they’ve heard similar promises in the past that came to nothing.

“I tell them, this is the first time we have had a separate office in charge of the transformation,” he said. “I report directly to Jonathan Scharfen, USCIS deputy director. We have executive support like never before. I meet weekly with the USCIS deputy director, and as needed with the DHS Undersecretary for Management, the DHS CIO and the DHS chief of procurement. With our new fee rule, we have dedicated funding. This will be 100 percent fee-funded.”

The agency’s managers are interested, despite their doubts, he added.

“It is critical to our future and how we serve our customers. We need to get it right this time.”