

U.S. Agency Is Swamped by Requests for Visas

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Immigration authorities have received about 300,000 applications for high-skilled-employment visas since July 1, federal officials said yesterday, a deluge unleashed after the federal government first said it would not accept any applications for those visas during July and then reversed course.

Citizenship and Immigration Services, the federal agency, was still receiving applications for employment visas yesterday, the last day of a special period it announced on July 17 for immigrants with professional skills to file petitions for permanent residence visas, known as green cards. As a result, the total tally of applications received in the last six weeks was not available.

The agency admitted it was swamped by the applications it had already received, which was more than double the annual limit of 140,000 employment visas.

According to official figures, in the three months before July the agency received an average of 54,700 applications a month for all green cards, including employment visas and those based on family ties. Applications were already surging then as foreigners sought to file papers before higher processing fees took effect on July 30.

“That is a fantastically high number,” said Carl Shusterman, an immigration lawyer in Los Angeles. Mr. Shusterman said he thought 300,000 was the highest number of employment applications the immigration agency had received in the 31 years he had practiced immigration law.

Presenting their applications did not guarantee that immigrants would receive their green cards quickly, since the annual limit remains the same. All the applications did was ensure the immigrants places on the list for green cards.

The visa roller coaster ride began on June 12, when the State Department announced that visas would be available in July for a variety of professional immigrants. The State Department offers visas, and Citizen and Immigration Services processes applications for them.

Immigrants eligible for employment visas include doctors, nurses and people with advanced degrees and technology skills. Before they can apply, they must obtain certification from the federal government that no American workers are available for their jobs.

After thousands of foreigners hurried to prepare applications, the State Department said abruptly on July 2 that no visas would be available after all because the immigration

agency had accelerated its processing and claimed them. After a nationwide outcry from lawyers, at least one lawsuit and a reprimand from Representative Zoe Lofgren, the California Democrat who is chairwoman of an immigration subcommittee, the federal agencies relented on July 17, saying applications would be received for four weeks.

Inundated, Citizenship and Immigration Services has not even been able to notify applicants that their petitions have been received, said Bill Wright, a spokesman for the agency.

The about-face was a relief for thousands of high-skilled immigrants seeking green cards after working in the United States on temporary visas. Once their applications have been officially received, they will have more job mobility and their spouses can apply for work authorization.

“It reinforced my belief in the American way of government,” said Satish Kumar, 31, a visa applicant who is a software programmer from India working for a California technology company.

But because of annual limits, the new green card applications will vastly increase backlogs. Most new applicants will still face waits as long as five years before they receive their green cards.

“The root of the problem is the arcane and ridiculous limit on visas for skilled immigrants whom the United States wants,” said Murtuza Bahrainwala, 38, an Indian doctor in Decatur, Ill., who applied last month.