

Backlog wipeout will close thousands of immigration applications

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More than 280,000 people who have been waiting years for a decision on their immigration files could be soon be chopped from the list as the federal government moves to streamline its immigration practices.

It's a decision some immigration lawyers are calling a betrayal by the government that they say is changing the rules too late in the game.

"These people have had the rug pulled out from underneath them," said Montreal-based lawyer David Chalk.

"The government of Canada invited people who had certain qualifications to apply, these people invested time energy and hope."

Citizenship and Immigration Canada said it's coping with half a decade of application backlogs by focusing efforts on skilled immigrants who can immediately fill holes in the country's labour market.

The change was proposed in the [federal budget](#), presented by the Conservative government Thursday.

If approved, the department will close files of potential immigrants who applied under the Federal Skilled Worker Program before Feb. 27, 2008 if an immigration officer did not make a decision on their case by the end of March.

The move is expected to affect around 280,000 people, including the applicants and their dependants.

'Major roadblock'

"Having to process applications that are as many as eight years out of date reduces our ability to focus on new applicants with skills and talents that our economy needs today."

According to the immigration department, the number of applications received under the Federal Skilled Worker Program has greatly exceeded the space available each year. There have also been changes in eligibility criteria since 2008.

Those factors have resulted in long processing times and produced a significant backlog.

In 2010, the department added caps to the program and managed to reduce the overall backlog by 25 per cent. But, without the elimination of old files, people could be left waiting five more years for a decision, according to Kenny.

\$130 million in refunds

Citizenship and Immigration Canada will refund \$130 million in fees paid by applicants whose file pre-dates 2008 and is being closed. They can re-apply under the new criteria.

Dan Bohbot, head of the Quebec Immigration Lawyers Association, said the decision to simply close those files represents a dramatic shift and one he believes will hurt Canada's reputation abroad.

"People really will not trust the process of immigration in Canada and that's going to affect our reputation and it's going to affect maybe the quality of immigrants wanting to come here in the first place," he said.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/story/2012/04/01/montreal-immigration-budget-backlog-skilled-workers.html>