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Immigration officials weigh fee increase, layoffs

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Nathan Lindstrom For the Chronicle

Alejandro Mayorkas, director of Citizenship and Immigration Services, is worried about a big budget shortfall.

The director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services said Friday that the agency is seriously considering increasing fees for immigration benefits amid a major budget shortfall.

Alejandro Mayorkas, the director of USCIS, said in an interview with the Houston Chronicle that a fee increase is considered a last resort, but is still “probable” considering the agency's steep drop-off in revenue last year and dismal projections for 2010.

A set of hefty fee increases by immigration officials two years ago sparked widespread criticism by immigrant advocates, who charged that steep hikes could price some immigrants out of citizenship and other immigration benefits.

USCIS, which relies heavily on fees paid by immigrants, closed the 2009 fiscal year with a \$164 million shortfall after a sharp decline in immigration benefit applications.

The agency also is reviewing possible cost-cutting measures, including layoffs, Mayorkas said, adding that those, too, would be considered a last resort.

“Our overhead, our costs, need to be reduced,” he said. “There exists the possibility that we may have to seek a fee increase. We’re considering all the options.”

Immigration benefit applications dropped off sharply after the 2007 fee increase, and talk of another cost hike is worrying immigrant advocates in Houston, particularly in the midst of the economic downturn.

“With the economy the way it is, if the fees continue to go up, you'll see a lot of people struggling to make ends meet and get that status,” said Cesar Espinosa, executive director of the Houston-based immigrant advocacy group America For All. “A lot of people are discouraged from applying for citizenship just because they can't afford it.”

Citizenship costs more

In July 2007, the cost of processing a citizenship application increased from \$330 to \$595, plus an \$80 fingerprinting fee. At the same time, the cost of a green card application including biometrics rose from \$325 to more than \$1,000 with the fingerprinting charge.

In the months before the fee increases took effect, USCIS reported a sharp increase in the number of immigration applications. The agency processed more than 1 million citizenship applications in 2008, but that number dropped off significantly last fiscal year, to about 733,000.

“We are very mindful of the fact that two years ago, fees were increased dramatically,” Mayorkas said, adding that he is aware that the fees can be “difficult to bear” for many immigration applicants.

Mayorkas added that since the last fee hike was implemented, the agency significantly reduced application processing times, a frequent point of criticism. The agency is now processing naturalization applications within five months nationally, and within about three in Houston, according to USCIS data.

For fiscal year 2010, USCIS received a \$55 million general appropriation from Congress — not including funding designated for specific programs, such as citizenship grants or the E-Verify electronic employment verification system, Mayorkas said. He was unable to pinpoint the projected shortfall for 2010 on Friday, but said it was anticipated to top \$100 million.

It's bad timing

Mayorkas acknowledged that the timing of the agency's financial woes is unfortunate, considering that talks are under way in Washington, D.C., about the prospects for a comprehensive immigration reform bill next year.

Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano on Friday reiterated the Obama administration's commitment to seeking a legalization program in 2010 for the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants in the U.S., which would increase USCIS' workload exponentially.

Mayorkas said the agency has started to prepare for the possibility of a massive legalization by improving its ability to capture fingerprints at application centers across the country, and by redesigning USCIS' Web site to be fully bilingual, among other measures.

Mayorkas, who met with community leaders in Houston Friday afternoon, said he plans to discuss the possible fee increases with leaders of immigrant communities across the country, noting that he does not intend to make a unilateral decision.

“It is a difficult decision, and a decision that warrants the involvement of a number of different constituencies,” he said.