

First online immigration application now available

A struggling, billion-dollar project to digitize immigration paperwork took a significant step forward on Tuesday by going live with its first online form. Certain visa-holders seeking to extend or change the status of their stays now can create Amazon-like accounts to securely file the application, Form I-539. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services effort, called Transformation, is intended to computerize the presently paper-based process of obtaining legal U.S. residency. Agency employees named the website for the system [ELIS](#), or Electronic Immigration System, in honor of the immigrant welcoming station Ellis Island, USCIS officials told *Nextgov*.

Tuesday's debut marks a highpoint for a project that has endured technical glitches, cost spikes and schedule slippages. Officials called the site a foundational release that went through many engineering hours to ensure future forms and features will function properly.

Filers will see immediate advantages, such as a less burdensome application with drop-down menus that are customized based on the user's answers to previous questions, officials said. In addition, the foreign visitors will receive a response to their requests about 11 days faster, within 65 days rather than 76 days.

The agency intends to roll out more forms in stages, as part of a reworked strategy called "agile" development, USCIS officials said. The Obama administration has been pushing computer projects in this phased-in direction to avoid wasting time and money on constructing an entire system before testing whether it works. Agency caseworkers still will be shuffling paper files for interdepartmental processing and some administrative work. Within the next one or two releases -- each release takes at most six months to build -- the project will have computerized more of the information those adjudicators need, officials said on Monday.

USCIS Director Alejandro Mayorkas said in a statement, "USCIS employees believe in the transformation of our agency from a paper-based to an online environment. It is through their vision, unwavering commitment and hard work that we have reached this important milestone."

A demonstration of the site at USCIS headquarters on Monday showed how ELIS walks visitors through the online application with "Tips" sidebars and detailed prompts. The account setup process requires that users enter personal information and answers to security questions to verify their identities. Subsequent screens instruct users how to fill out mandatory fields, upload supporting documents and pay application fees. Each time an applicant logs on to track responses or add a document, the user must either answer a security question, such as who is your favorite celebrity, or request a one-time password be sent to a cell phone or e-mail address.

If an applicant experiences technical difficulties, the user can call a toll-free number for customer service. Accounts will be deleted after 30 days of inactivity to protect the user's personal information. For that reason, USCIS officials currently advise that only I-539 filers create an account.

In the future, the tool will offer collaboration accounts for government employees so that federal partners, such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement or the State Department, can share cases, officials said. USCIS stressed that during design it incorporated feedback from those other agencies, case officers at processing service centers, and advocacy groups such as NAFSA, a professional

organization for international educators. Agency officials plan later this summer or fall to hold listening sessions with student visa-holders after they have had a chance to try the tool. ELIS presently is available only in English.

USCIS, part of the Homeland Security Department, started Transformation in 2007 with the aim of using \$536 million to digitize application processing by 2013. But the program's most recent Government Accountability Office [audit](#), released November 2011, reported a two-year delay and \$292 million cost overrun -- the result of USCIS contracting for the work with IBM before pinning down the program's full cost and system requirements. By October, a clearer timeline for form rollouts and project completion should emerge, USCIS officials said on Monday.

Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, ranking member of the Judiciary Committee, [requested reviews](#) by the GAO and USCIS, following a February 2011 *Nextgov* [article](#) that stated the total cost of the project at the time was projected to jump from about \$500 million to \$2.2 billion.

Transformation's most recent [departmental review](#) on May 14 garnered a 2 on a 5-point scale. The score, a one point drop since last year, reflected botched usability tests prior to a planned December 2011 launch that pushed back the project 14 weeks and increased costs by \$29 million.

An internal fall 2011 presentation obtained by *Nextgov* identified 275 critical and high defects and indicated those numbers were rising. As of Nov. 27, 2011, more test cases had failed than passed: Of 1,447 total trials for the one form, 387 had flunked, 381 had succeeded, and the other cases were either blocked or awaiting testing.

DHS Chief Information Officer Richard Spires, in the May evaluation, stated, "Although progress has been made, challenges still remain. This program remains under the watchful leadership of both the USCIS and DHS CIO. The CIO assesses the USCIS Transformation Program as a Moderately High Risk investment."

USCIS officials said they agree with the assessment and are working closely with the CIO's office to ensure the long-term success of the program.

On May 16, Homeland Security officials signed [a contract](#) with IBM for \$1.6 million to continue the project through March 2014.

In a statement on Monday, Spires said, "The USCIS Transformation effort is a large, complex undertaking involving changes to business processes, IT systems, and organizational culture. I commend USCIS for their fortitude and perseverance in reaching the milestone of the first release of USCIS ELIS. This new system provides a reliable platform on which USCIS can rapidly deploy new functionality to support enhanced immigration benefit processing."

<http://m.nextgov.com/cio-briefing/2012/05/first-online-immigration-application-now-available/55848/>