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National visa center: the gateway to visa processing

Office of the Month

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Tucked away in a picturesque corner of New England amid towering pines, historic buildings and seagoing vessels, the National Visa Center (NVC) is one of the first steps for most immigrant visa applications. Little known outside the Bureau of Consular Affairs, the NVC is located in a bustling commercial development on the edge of Portsmouth, N.H., on the grounds of what once was the Strategic Air Command's Pease Air Force Base. NVC's sister facility, "the CA building," is across the parking lot and dedicated to former Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs Mary Ryan.

A benefit of NVC's location becomes clear every summer when the Boston-Pease Airshow and Blue Angels come to town: Windows rattle and walls shake as the planes practice acrobatics above the parking lot, which fills with enthralled lunch-time observers.

Opened in 1994 as the successor to the Transitional Immigrant Visa Processing Center in Rosslyn, Va., the NVC centralizes all immigrant visa preprocessing and appointment scheduling for overseas posts. The NVC collects paperwork and fees before forwarding a case, ready for adjudication, to the responsible post. The center also handles immigrant and fiancé visa petitions, and while it does not adjudicate visa applications, it provides technical assistance and support to visa-adjudicating consular officials overseas.

Only two Foreign Service officers, the director and deputy director, work at the center, along with just five Civil Service employees. They work with almost 500 contract employees doing preprocessing of visas, making the center one of the largest employers in the Portsmouth area. The contractor, Serco, Inc., has worked with the NVC since its inception and with the Department for almost 18 years.

The NVC houses more than 2.6 million immigrant visa files, receives almost two million pieces of mail per year and received more than half a million petitions from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) in 2011. Its file rooms' high-density shelves are stacked floor-to-ceiling with files, each a collection of someone's hopes and dreams and each requiring proper handling.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

In recent months, the NVC has been using HOV Services, another contractor, to digitize all documents in the approximately 1.2 million noncurrent visas files stored there. The process involves disassembling files, scanning the documents and then reassembling the files in the correct order. More than 80 people, working two shifts, use machines that can scan more than 175 images per minute. A random sampling of the work is regularly subjected to quality control to make sure no images were missed.

The NVC's Fraud Prevention Unit (FPU) searches incoming petitions for fraud indicators. It prescreens all fiancé and employment based immigrant visa petitions and as many marriage-based petitions as possible

before the cases are sent overseas for adjudication, saving posts thousands of work hours investigating potentially fraudulent petitions.

The FPU can access a myriad of databases to research cases and has a fraud detection national security officer from the Department of Homeland Security, who brings DHS expertise and resources to investigations.

The FPU also has the ability to enter "lookouts" into the Immigrant Visa Information System (IVIS) database used for NVC pre-processing. Lookouts flag suspect applications to ensure appropriate prescreening. Once prescreening is completed, all information and a detailed memo are forwarded to the post with the file.

The FPU is also the main liaison between posts and USCIS. If a post does not issue a visa, the case file is returned to the NVC, which then forwards the petition to the appropriate USCIS office for revocation or reaffirmation. The FPU also assists posts by conducting validation studies or additional case research and determining fraud trends.

The NVC also preprocesses the chief of mission (COM) application required for the filing of a petition for a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV). Such visas, for foreign nationals who have performed services for the U.S. government in Iraq and Afghanistan, require COM concurrence before the applicant can file a petition with USCIS. The NVC collects the requisite documents from such applicants and, when complete, forwards the package to the U.S. embassies in Baghdad or Kabul for COM approval.

At one point, many such applicants were having difficulty acquiring the required letter of recommendation from their former U.S. Armed Forces supervisors. In response, the NVC worked within the State Department and with the DOD and White House to develop a supervisor locator system that helps applicants obtain the needed letter, an innovation that has enabled many Iraqis and Afghans to take advantage of the SIV process.

While visas are the NVC's bread and butter, the center can perform other services in a crisis. For instance, when the District of Columbia was hit by 2011's "Snowmageddon," all public visa calls to the Department were diverted to a 90-plus-person telephone inquiry unit at the NVC. In the aftermath of the Haiti earthquake, the NVC assisted the Department by responding to questions from U.S. citizens and visa petitioners and beneficiaries. The telephone inquiry unit also handles calls for consular sections at posts in crisis. The NVC is one of two Department facilities doing facial recognition for passport and visa applicants. Since February 2011, 22 reviewers have been comparing application photographs electronically with a host of resources that capture photographs. Potential matches are compiled into a review record. The facial recognition team reviewed a staggering 1,157,338 photos in January.

Whether processing immigrant visa cases, managing millions of files, communicating with clients or members of Congress, preventing visa fraud or providing support to Department bureaus and missions during crises, the NVC reflects its unofficial motto: "Not a file, a family."

Recently, the motto was exemplified by a retiring file clerk who remonstrated with her manager to "take good care of my families when I'm gone" and pointed to row upon row of immigrant visa files under her care.

That caring attitude is also reflected in the NVC's sense of family among staff members, who hold potlucks meals to celebrate special events and are active in the community, holding holiday toy drives for needy children and food or blood drives year round.

The NVC, the gateway to visa processing, is about people serving people.

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