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Agency Plans for Visa Push by Residents Made Legal

By [JULIA PRESTON](#)

Although [President Obama](#) has put off an [immigration](#) overhaul until next year, the federal agency in charge of approving visas is planning ahead for the possibility of giving legal status to millions of illegal immigrants, the agency's director said Thursday.

“We are under way to prepare for that,” Alejandro Mayorkas, the director of the agency, the [United States Citizenship and Immigration Services](#), said in an interview. Mr. Obama has told immigration officials that a legalization program would be part of legislation the White House would propose, said Mr. Mayorkas, who became director in August. The agency's goal, he said, is to be ready to expand rapidly to handle the gigantic increase in visa applications it would face if the legislation, known as comprehensive immigration reform, passed Congress.

The citizenship agency faces a difficult balancing act, preparing for a potential workload bigger than any it has faced, based on legislation in early stages of discussion that is fiercely opposed by many lawmakers in Congress. Also, the agency must work to reduce backlogs and delays that have hampered its performance.

There are no official estimates of the number of illegal immigrants who would apply for legal documents. The Pew Hispanic Center and the Center for Immigration Studies, two research groups in Washington, estimate that at least 10.8 million illegal immigrants live in this country. But a large number of those would not be eligible for legal status for many reasons, including past immigration violations.

Currently, the citizenship agency can handle applications from about six million immigrants a year, Mr. Mayorkas said, including the time-consuming collection of fingerprints and other biometric identity information. Under some plans for legalization, the agency might receive that many applications in a few weeks.

An example of the planning, Mr. Mayorkas said, is an effort to improve the agency's ability to receive applications via postal mail at secure reception points known as lockboxes. The agency currently receives about 65 percent of applications through lockboxes, which is more efficient than receiving them through local offices. The agency is trying to move quickly to receive all applications through lockboxes.

One idea calls for illegal immigrants to start the legalization process by verifying their presence in the United States through a simple registration form mailed to a lockbox, according to officials familiar with the planning.

As part of the planning, Homeland Security Secretary [Janet Napolitano](#), Mr. Mayorkas and other officials have held meetings around the country in recent weeks to gather suggestions from the public for the overhaul.

The Obama administration's planning contrasts with that of the Bush administration, which also supported a legalization program. Some opponents of President Bush's proposal, which was defeated in Congress in 2007, cited the immigration agencies' lack of preparation.

Some lawmakers who oppose the overhaul have questioned whether the planning was a good use of limited resources. "There is a risk to national security that they will take their eyes off background checks of immigrants," said Representative Steve King of Iowa, the senior Republican on the House immigration subcommittee, "while they are busy setting up for legislation that has not been introduced in any way, shape or form."