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LENGTHY APPLICATION DELAYS WILL FORCE NEWCOMERS TO DEFER AMERICAN DREAM

USCIS Must Take Swift and Effective Action to Address Growing Naturalization Backlog and “Frontlog”

In late-November 2007, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) announced that it anticipates that there will be a significant increase in the processing time for U.S. citizenship applications filed since June 2007, with the agency estimating that it may need 16 -18 months to complete these cases. This increase is the result of the surge of legal permanent residents seeking naturalization in federal Fiscal Year (FY) 2007 - the agency received 1.1 million applications, a 55% increase over the volume received the year before. As a result, the backlog of naturalization cases awaiting completion grew dramatically in FY 2007, and in some parts of the country, the USCIS is reporting severe delays even in the initial stage of application processing.

Newcomers who are pursuing U.S. citizenship are eager to become full participants in our nation’s democracy, but the USCIS’ processing delays could jeopardize the opportunity to have their voices heard during the 2008 election season. **It is critical the agency develop and implement a comprehensive plan to eliminate the naturalization application backlog, with the goal of ensuring that all qualified applicants who filed in FY 2007 are sworn-in as U.S. citizens by July 4, 2008.** The USCIS should work closely on this effort with national and local organizations that provide U.S. citizenship assistance and advocates familiar with the needs of newcomers who apply for naturalization.

The Dramatic Growth of the Naturalization Backlog and “Frontlog”

- **In federal Fiscal Year (FY) 2007, the number of naturalization applications increased significantly (55%) from the previous fiscal year¹.** Generally, through Fiscal Years 2005 and 2006, the number of naturalization applications filed each month stayed in the range of 40,000 – 75,000. Throughout FY 2007, the number began to surge dramatically, with the monthly volumes ranging from approximately 61,000 to 135,000 (see [Figure 1](#) on page 5). According to the USCIS, the number of Form N-400 naturalization applications filed in FY 2007 was 1,132,073, which represents a 55% increase over the previous fiscal year.

¹ The number of naturalization applications reported for FY 2007 is based on USCIS data included in the agency’s Monthly Statistical Reports. The data on the receipt of applications in these reports generally reflect the date that the applications were entered into the agency’s case management system, rather than the actual date the applications were physically received by the USCIS. Because of delays in the entry of the applications, the FY 2007 data may not reflect the full number of applications actually received by the agency during that fiscal year, particularly with respect to applications received in the last few months of the year.

- There are several reasons for the surge of naturalization applications filed last fiscal year. **Legal permanent residents continue to view U.S. citizenship as an opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to this nation, and they want to help build our neighborhoods and communities. As our nation’s debate on the future of our immigration policy has become increasingly intense, newcomers want to ensure that their voices are heard in the electoral process.** Several thousands of these newcomers also submitted applications in the months preceding August 2007, when the USCIS first increased the fees for starting the naturalization process from \$400 to \$675.
- **The efforts of the *ya es hora ¡Ciudadanía! (It’s time, citizenship!)* campaign has played a key role in this dramatic surge of naturalization applicants.** Launched in January 2007, *ya es hora* is a national year-long effort to effort inform, educate and motivate eligible legal permanent residents across the United States to apply for U.S. citizenship. This campaign has brought together over 400 national and regional organizations, including community and faith-based organizations, unions, public and private agencies, law offices and attorneys, elected and appointed officials, and private businesses. The organizational partners in this campaign include the NALEO Educational Fund, the National Council of La Raza, the Service Employees International Union, and the We Are America Alliance. In addition, the campaign’s media partners, Univision Communications, Entravision Communications, and *impreMedia*, have played a critical leadership role in the campaign’s public education efforts, by producing programs, public service announcements, and advertisements to reach Latino viewers and readers.
- **During FY 2007, the number of applications in the naturalization backlog² has also been growing steadily** (see [Figure 2](#) on page 5). At the end of FY 2005 and 2006, the number of naturalization applications pending was 552,940 and 473,467 respectively. By the end of FY 2007, that number had reached 877,758, an 85% increase from the end of FY 2006.
- Of particular concern are the lengthy delays that naturalization applicants are now confronting at the very beginning of the process – the time that it takes the USCIS, through one its four Regional Service Centers, to issue a receipt to newcomers who have filed their applications, and enter them into the agency’s case management system. **As a result of this “frontlog,” applicants are having to wait several weeks before they even know if the USCIS has received their applications, and before the agency takes the very first steps toward processing the applications.**
- **The frontlog delays vary widely between different USCIS Regional Service Centers.** Between August 2007 and November 2007, the agency has provided this information through reports indicating how far back applications were filed that are being issued receipts as of the date of the report. For example, on November 30, 2007, the Nebraska Service Center was issuing receipts for applications received on November 26; the California Service Center, for applications received on November 8; the Vermont Service Center for applications received on September 5; and the Texas Service Center, for applications received on July 29. Thus, as of this writing, **the number of days between the filing of applications and the issuance of receipts ranges from 4 days for the Nebraska Service Center (less than a week) to 124 for the Texas Service Center (about four months).** [Figure 3](#) on page 6 provides frontlog data for all four Service Centers.
- USCIS frontlog data also indicate that as of this writing, while the California, Nebraska and Vermont Service Centers are making progress in reducing the frontlog, the Texas Service Center frontlog is continuing to grow. (See [Figure 3](#) on page 6).

² For the purposes of its operations, the USCIS defines its “backlog” through a formula that starts with the number of applications pending, and makes deductions for cases which are not “ripe” for processing because the agency is awaiting the results of record checks from other agencies, additional information from an applicant, or for other reasons the agency believes are not in its control. To provide information on the full scope of the applications awaiting adjudication, we define the backlog as the full number of pending naturalization applications.

The USCIS Must Take Swift and Effective Action to Address Application Processing Delays

The USCIS' estimated 16 – 18 month processing times for applications filed after June 1, 2007 could prevent many newcomers from realizing their dream of becoming full participants in our nation's democracy during the 2008 election season.

- **The USCIS' estimated processing times also represent a significant increase over waiting times experienced by applicants in recent years, and comes in the wake of an agency commitment to improve customer service after imposing the fee increase.** In many parts of the country, before the surge of applications, newcomers were able to complete the naturalization process in 6 – 9 months. When the agency made the final announcement of the fee increase, it projected reducing naturalization application processing times from seven to five months by the end of FY 2008. **However, many of the newcomers who will be affected by the agency's delays are the very applicants who paid the higher fees.**
- **While the USCIS has announced some actions it will take to address processing delays, it needs to develop and implement a comprehensive plan that will significantly reduce future processing times from its current estimates. Under this plan, the agency must ensure that all qualified naturalization applications who filed in FY 2007 are sworn-in as U.S. citizens by July 4, 2008. In developing this plan, the agency must work closely on both the national and local level with organizations that provide U.S. citizenship assistance and advocates familiar with the needs of newcomers who apply for naturalization.**
- **The USCIS backlog elimination plan must provide a specific timetable for reducing the naturalization processing backlog, with measurable milestones and outcomes. The plan must also set forth how the agency will address the wide variation in the "frontlog" processing times between different Regional Service Centers.** To help ensure accountability for meeting its timetable, the USCIS should provide monthly reports to the public on pending naturalization applications and naturalization processing times. These reports should provide this information for each district office and sub-office that processes naturalization applications. To help community-based groups obtain these reports, they should be accessible in both a hard-copy format and on-line.
- The USCIS has announced that it intends to hire 1,500 new employees to address its increased workload. **In developing a comprehensive backlog elimination plan, the agency must provide information on how it specifically intends to deploy these new workers to meet its plan's milestones and outcomes, including the timeline for the hiring and training of the workers, and their workload priorities.** It must also provide information about the Department of Labor's (DOL) investigation into the agency's new contract with Stanley Associates, Inc. at the California and Vermont Service Centers, and the concerns that have arisen over reports that the new contract cuts the pay of some workers. In addition, the USCIS must provide information on the impact of the new contract on the morale and productivity of Service Center workers and their ability to handle their increased workload.
- **The USCIS' backlog elimination plan must examine other options available to the agency to reduce naturalization application processing times, which should include seeking appropriated funds from Congress to ensure that it has the resources necessary for implementation of its plan.** The agency should also thoroughly review the management, process and technological enhancements that are available. In this connection, the USCIS should address how it will utilize the components of the business and infrastructure modernization plan, which was one of the justifications for imposing its fee increase, to eliminate the backlog.

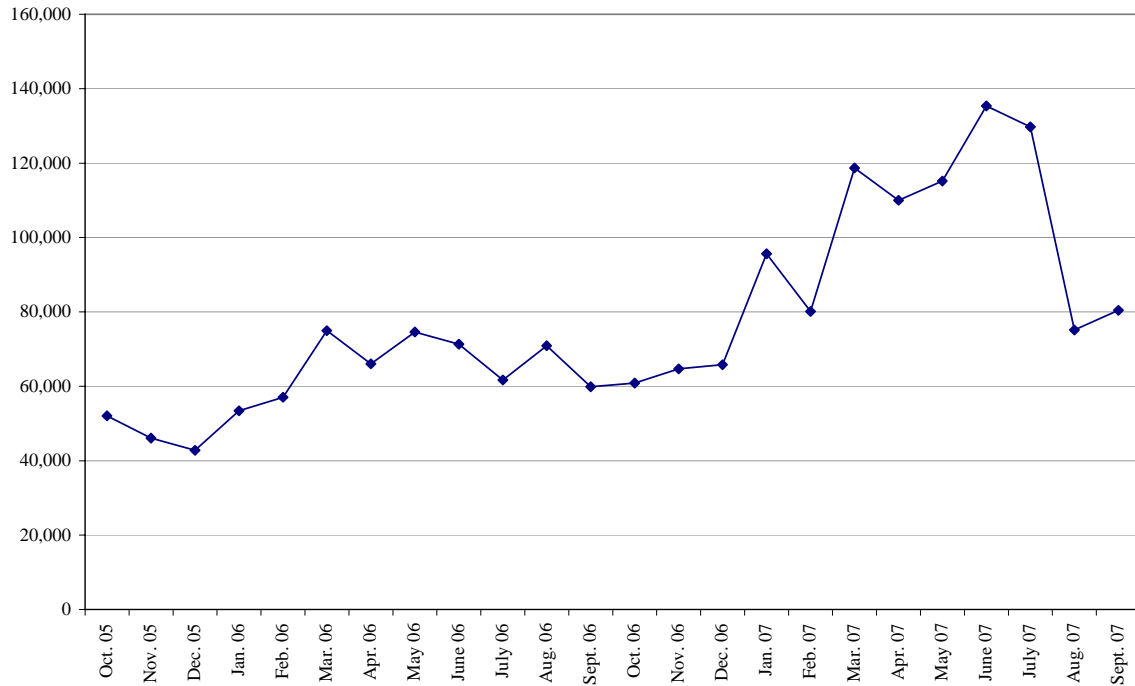
- **The USCIS must consult with local immigrant advocacy and naturalization service providers in its regions and districts as it develops and implements its backlog elimination plan.** The Regional Centers and district offices should provide these groups with information about the agency's progress on a regular basis.

The NALEO Educational Fund will continue its efforts to work with the USCIS and other policymakers to address the naturalization backlog and frontlog. We will be providing updates on policy developments and actions that you can take to assist with the advocacy on this critical issue. For more information about these efforts, please contact:

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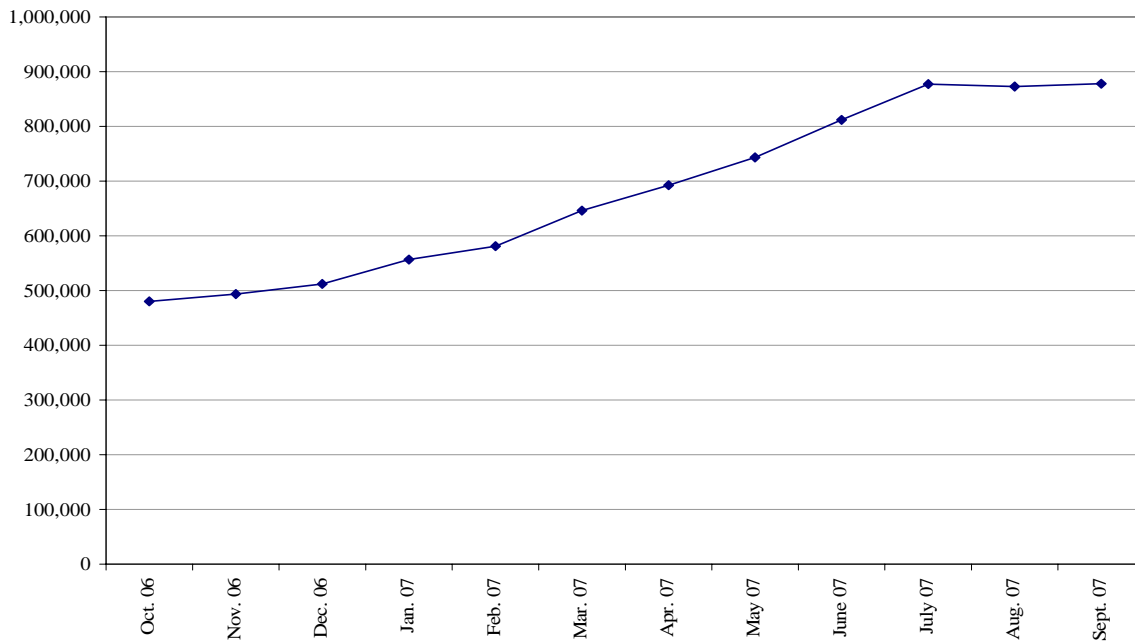
For more information about the *ya es hora ¡Ciudadania!* campaign, please contact Javier Angulo, (213) 747-7606, ext. 159, jangulo@naleo.org, or visit the campaign's website at www.yaeshora.info.

Figure 1
Naturalization Applications Received
FY 2006 and FY 2007



Source: USCIS PAS G-22.3 data

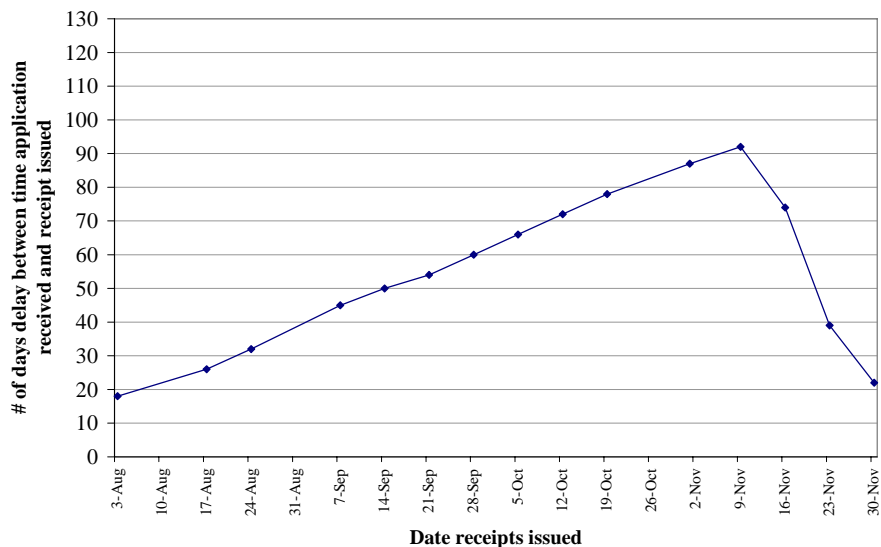
Figure 2
Naturalization Applications Pending
FY 2007



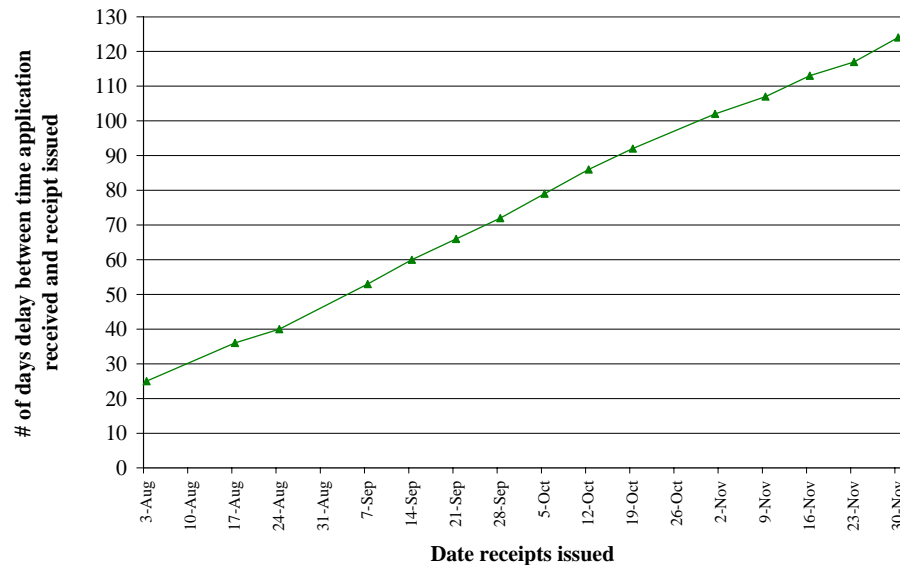
Source: USCIS PAS G-22.3 data

Figure 3
Frontlog for N-400 Naturalization Applications
August – November 2007

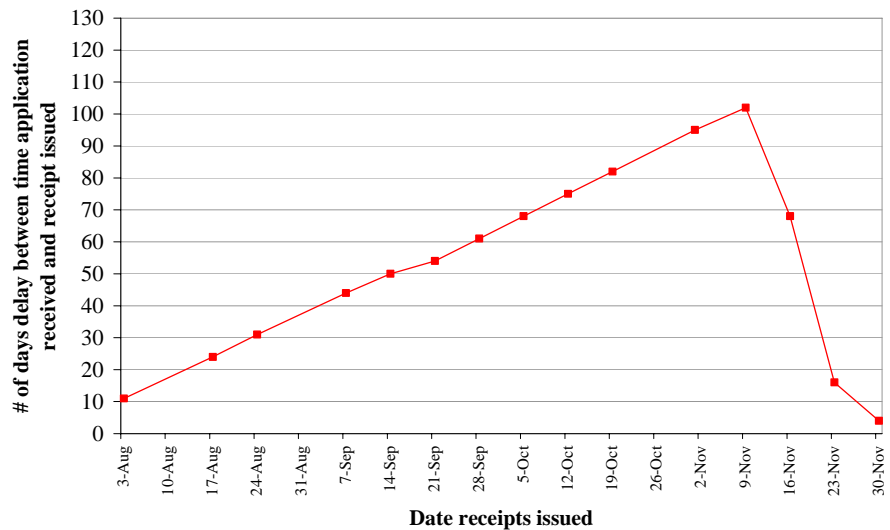
California Service Center



Texas Service Center



Nebraska Service Center



Vermont Service Center

