

## Orlando office cuts backlog on immigration

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Immigrants who are waiting for their green cards or citizenship applications to be processed can expect some relief as the paperwork pile starts to inch downward in Orlando.

The Orlando immigration center -- a branch of the agency's Miami operation -- had the second-longest wait for legalization and citizenship processing back in October. Due to staffing changes, it now ranks fourth for long waits, compared to 80 immigration offices handling similar cases throughout the nation.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Director Emilio Gonzalez, confirmed to his post in January, said Thursday that he will stand by the agency's commitment to reduce the national backlog to about six months by October of this year.

On average, the national wait on legalization requests is about eight months. Citizenship cases already reach the six-month target. But there are other categories of immigration requests, from refugee pleas to petitions of people living abroad, that would be factored into the backlog.

Other Florida offices in Miami, Tampa and West Palm Beach also have above-average wait times on legalization and citizenship requests.

"We are committing personnel, we are committing resources to those areas that have the largest backlogs," said Gonzalez, who also faces the task of streamlining his agency as it prepares for proposals on immigration reform that could increase the workload.

The agency handles about 30,000 applications nationally for immigration benefits on a daily basis, which adds up to some 8 million applications a year.

More than 1,000 people a day go to the Orlando office, which handles cases from immigrants in Brevard, Flagler, Lake, Marion, Orange, Osceola, Seminole, Sumter and Volusia counties. The number has grown steadily with the region's immigrant population.

The office ranked second with the longest delays in October, but personnel changes that included reassignment and temporary hires have reduced the waiting time.

The average wait in Orlando decreased from almost 2 1/2 years for adjustment requests -- the legalization petitions for people who were here with expired and temporary visas or no papers at all -- to just less than two years within the past five months, according to USCIS records.

The wait on naturalization cases, the process by which legal immigrants become U.S. citizens, went from an average wait of a year and a half to only one year.

The changes have been noticeable for those who frequent the Orlando immigration office, such as Gail Seeram, an Orlando immigration attorney based in Pine Hills. "I have seen a big improvement, especially for naturalization cases. If they interview you, they swear you in the same day now," Seeram said.

The trickier cases are the legalization requests, Seeram said. People who apply receive temporary working permits that are renewed each year and they risk losing their chance at permanent residence if they travel outside the country.

Sandra Narine, for instance, came with temporary papers from Trinidad in 2001 and married a U.S. citizen. It took her three years to get her case heard, after many prayers and tears over her inability to return to Trinidad to visit her elderly father.

Narine got the approval stamp on her passport on Wednesday and should receive her green card soon. She was elated and went home to place her passport by a marble statue of Krishna, in gratitude for what she calls her miracle.

"Then I called my father in Trinidad," Narine said, "and told him I'm finally going to visit and see him again. He was crying. I told him and he was crying."

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