

Jill Marie Bussey, Advocacy Director
Oral Testimony
“Policy Changes and Processing Delays at USCIS”
Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship, U.S. House Committee on the Judiciary
Tuesday, July 16, 2019

STATEMENT

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Lofgren and members of the subcommittee. My name is Jill Marie Bussey, and I am the Director of Advocacy at the Catholic Legal Immigration Network and an attorney with over 20 years of experience in immigration law. We are very grateful for this invitation.

Guided by our Catholic identity and mission to welcome the stranger, CLINIC promotes the rights and dignity of immigrants. We do this by advocating for fair and just immigration practices. Our network of over 370 nonprofit immigrant legal services agencies serve hundreds of thousands of low-income immigrants each year, providing us with valuable insights and real life examples of the problems they face before U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Over the past two years, we have become increasingly alarmed to see the political leadership at USCIS steering this services-based agency *toward* enforcement and away from its Congressionally-mandated purpose, the administration of immigration benefits.

USCIS customers provide their personal information, their hard-earned money, and their trust in this agency. Under the current leadership, their lives are being upended, as deliberate policy choices and gross mismanagement have led to a crisis-level case processing backlogs. For example, longer forms and new rules asking for unnecessary information create needless redundancies and drain resources. Cases with small errors or issues that were previously resolved through customer service have been denied, forcing everyone to go back to square one. USCIS has also relieved itself of its duty to process work permits in a sensible timeframe. Slow processing times rob people of their dignity, livelihood and security. Our written testimony explains in detail the problematic policies that we have identified as well their human consequences. Today, we lift up three cases.

(Haa zim) Hazem’s story illustrates the harm caused by USCIS work permit processing backlogs. Hazem came to the U.S. in 2011 to study electrical engineering, just as Syria’s civil war erupted. Unable to go home after his student visa ended, he applied for Temporary Protected Status and found a job at a small firm in Oregon. Hazem faced numerous consequences due to application processing delays, including problems renewing his driver’s license, gaining access to his *own* bank account, and losing billable hours and income.

Delays may also deprive Americans of critical services when green card processing is stalled.

For example, Father Arjun is a Catholic priest from India serving a 160-mile rural area in upstate New York. He celebrates Mass, officiates weddings, visits the sick and presides over funerals. Waiting for over two years for his green card forced him and his diocese to submit multiple applications and fees to USCIS. Because his driver's license is connected to his immigration status, he has experienced difficulties getting it renewed. His work permit and driver's license are key tools that allow him to tend to vulnerable parishioners. In his case, USCIS' mismanagement may lead to someone not having their priest with them by their deathbed.

Work permits and green card applications are not the only cases that are being delayed. Life-saving survivor-based applications like Cheryl's have also slowed to a near-halt.

Cheryl is a Jamaican national and survivor of brutal domestic violence, who has waited for approval for her green card under VAWA for nearly a year, quadruple the previous processing time. Cheryl fled, but without a work permit, could not provide for her children and was forced to move back in with her abuser. Under current processing times, Cheryl will wait another half a year, likely more. Without these delays, Cheryl and her children would be safe right now.

She is at the mercy of USCIS to end this cycle.

The current situation at USCIS is wholly and completely avoidable. It was brought on by mismanagement and poor policy — USCIS at present has the resources it needs to do its job, which is to provide customer service. USCIS must rescind the policies that have brought us to this current crisis. It must prioritize immediately clearing the backlog of survivor-based applications and place limits on processing times to ensure the most vulnerable are protected.

I thank the committee for your attention to these issues and urge all Members of Congress to talk with their constituent services team to learn more about the human suffering USCIS is causing. Congress *must* hold USCIS leadership accountable — we can right this ship and restore faith in our immigration system together. Thank you!