

**Asylum Quarterly Engagement and Listening Session  
Script & Talking Points  
December 13, 2022**

**RAIO Opening – Ted Kim, Associate Director, RAIO**

- Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for joining today’s event. Thank you to the USCIS Public Engagement Division for continuing to work with us on these Asylum Quarterly Stakeholder Engagements.
- USCIS, and particularly the Refugee, Asylum and International Operations Directorate (RAIO, for short), recognizes and appreciates the vital role and contributions that you and your organizations play for asylum seekers.
- Over the past year, RAIO has held a number of recurring engagements, including for the Asylum Division, for the International and Refugee Affairs Division, and for Form I-730 Follow-to-Join Refugee/Asylee Relative Petitions.
- Today’s engagement is especially important to us because, at the beginning of this calendar year, we committed to holding Asylum Stakeholder Engagements each quarter starting with our inaugural engagement held in February, and we are proud we met that commitment.
- We are excited to continue with that commitment today and kick off fiscal year 2023 with this Quarter 1 event.
- We will focus today’s engagement on the affirmative asylum backlog and our efforts to address it.
- The affirmative backlog is an issue of particular interest and importance to all of us. We look forward to hearing input from you. I know we are all interested in addressing it. I appreciate the questions and suggestions submitted before today’s event. We will do our best to address as many as possible.
- We will address some of your questions and suggestions with the information we provide in our presentation.
- I am also pleased to announce that RAIO is establishing a district office structure between the field offices and headquarters in the Asylum Division.
  - The Asylum Division will create four district offices to manage the operation of asylum field offices.
  - These new district offices will be managed by senior executive service (SES) leaders, and the Asylum deputy division chief position will be classified as an SES-level role.
  - This new management structure will help the Asylum Division manage the growth we have experienced over the last decade and will allow us to better support our workforce as we expand our efforts to protect the world’s most vulnerable populations.
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- I am about to pass the microphone over to our next speaker, but I first want to take a moment to reintroduce him to you all.
- We are so happy to welcome back our newly returned Asylum Division chief, John Lafferty. He began his role November 6, 2022.
- John has a long history with RAIO generally and the Asylum Division specifically, and we are excited to have him lead our team.
- We are also grateful for the leadership of Andrew Davidson who has moved to the Office of the Director as a Senior Counselor and is helping Director Jaddou advance agency priorities including our humanitarian programs.
- I will now pass the mic over to you, John.

### **Asylum Opening – John Lafferty, Asylum Division Chief**

- Thank you, Ted.
- I am happy to be back with you all and once again engaging with the stakeholder community.
- We greatly appreciate the vital role that you and your organizations play for asylum seekers.
- I look forward to continuing these quarterly engagements and creating a space to discuss critical issues affecting those seeking asylum.
- I am joined today by two colleagues:
  - Brooke Kirkland, one of two acting deputy chiefs for the Asylum Division; and
  - Elizabeth, or Beth, Mura, senior advisor for the Asylum Division.
- Before we discuss one of the most pressing issues, the affirmative asylum backlog, I will provide some general updates on the asylum program, and then Brooke will provide updates on our hiring efforts, as well as general statistics for the Asylum Division.
- Beth Mura will then share our updates and progress toward reducing the affirmative asylum backlog.
- We will then begin the listening session portion of today's engagement.
- If you submitted a question and we do not address it today, please visit the USCIS Electronic Reading Room in the coming days. We will post responses to all pre-submitted questions there after this engagement.
- First, some staffing updates—Sue Raufer did a wonderful job as the acting asylum chief, and we appreciate her dedication and the work she put into that role. Thank you, Sue.
  - She has returned to her role as senior advisor to the chief of the Asylum Division and continues our important work supporting Operation Allies Welcome and Afghans seeking asylum
- Kelly Ryan entered on duty as a Senior Advisor to the Associate Director and Deputy Associate Director for RAIO. She has been assigned to work with the Asylum Division on asylum-related OAW issues.

Irvin Gadson, who was the acting director of the Houston Asylum Office (and permanent deputy director), has moved to another position within DHS. Bryan Hemming is now acting director of

the Houston Asylum Office, moving from his permanent position as the Houston Asylum Office chief of staff. Bryan is filling this role while Robert Daum is currently one of the Acting Deputy Chiefs of the Asylum Division.

### **General Updates and Statistics – John Lafferty**

- The Asylum Division has continued to work diligently across our various programs.
- From October 1, 2022, through November 15, 2022, we have received **34,066** affirmative asylum applications, both online and on paper. This number could rise as USCIS continues to work through the paper Form I-589 intake front log at the service centers.
  - The top five nationalities so far for this fiscal year for affirmative asylum receipts are **Cuba, Venezuela, Afghanistan, Nicaragua, and Colombia**.
  - Nationals of these five countries together make up approximately **78%** of our affirmative asylum receipts.
- From October 1, 2022, through November 15, 2022, we have received **13,199** credible fear referrals and **993** reasonable fear referrals.
  - So far this fiscal year, the top five nationalities for credible or reasonable fear referrals are **Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic**.
  - Nationals of these five countries together make up **65%** of our credible fear or reasonable fear receipts.
- Next, we turn to our **Operation Allies Welcome (OAW) caseload**, which consists of asylum applications received from Afghan nationals paroled into the United States on or after July 31, 2021, under OAW. As of November 15, 2022, we have received **10,848** asylum applications from OAW parolees.
  - The Asylum Division has completed over **7,532** interviews for these cases.
  - Of the cases completed so far, we have an approval rate of **99%**.
  - Over **97%** of these cases are completed within the 150 days mandated by Congress, absent exceptional circumstances.
- As you know, on November 15, 2022, the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia issued an order that will end the **Title 42 public health authority** at the southwest border.
  - This order is set to take effect next week, on December 21, 2022.
  - The Asylum Division and our DHS colleagues are preparing for this transition.
  - The reality is that we are already receiving an increased volume of CF cases and we have had to assign more staff to this workload over the past few weeks.
  - As you know from past surges, border processing impacts the Asylum Division's prioritization of workloads and the staffing available to assign to those priorities, including the processing of affirmative asylum cases, and we expect this to continue into the new year.
- With regard to the **Asylum Processing Rule** that took effect at the end of May 2022,
  - DHS continues to evaluate referral numbers for Asylum Merits Interviews (AMIs) in light of the anticipated end of Title 42 public health policy at the border.

- The most recent statistics on the rule, including the AMIs, are published by DHS Office of Immigration Statistics and can be found online. They are current through **September 2022**. <https://www.dhs.gov/office-immigration-statistics>
- This report is published on a monthly basis, and we are placing a link in the chat to the site where they are reported.
- More generally, we want to mention the new **online filing** process for the Form I-589.
  - This is an initiative that has been a long time in the making, and we are excited that it was launched to the public on November 15, 2022.
  - In the month since the public launch, more than 19,000 individuals have filed their Form I-589 online.
  - Filing online allows for faster receipting and faster Application Support Center scheduling for fingerprints than filing a paper application by mail does. It also offers the ability to supplement your online application with additional evidence through your online account.
  - Please have a look at the USCIS website for more information on the online Form I-589 filing process.
- Brooke, I will now hand it to you for an update on our hiring and associated training progress.

#### **Asylum Hiring and Training – Brooke Kirkland**

- Thank you, John.
- Hi everyone. As John mentioned earlier, I am Brooke Kirkland, one of the acting deputy chiefs for the Asylum Division.
- Looking at our hiring, we have made great progress on our goals.
- Beth will speak more specifically about our backlog appropriations hiring when we discuss the backlog, but looking at our overall staffing numbers, we are happy to report that as of **October 21**, the Asylum Division was at **80%** of authorized staffing.
- The Asylum Division's total authorized staff is currently **2,082**, with **1,662** positions filled. We have approximately **420 vacancies** remaining, with **359** individuals in the recruitment pipeline to fill them.
- **832** of **1,024** asylum officer positions are filled, which equals **80%**.
- USCIS' goal is to reach 95% by December 31.
- With all the hiring we have been doing, we have also been very busy training new asylum officers (or AO2s). Approximately 50% of the total AO2s currently onboard were hired in the past year, and almost 20% were hired in the past 6 months.
- In less than a year, between December 2021 and September 2022, RAIO and the Asylum Division trained approximately 500 new asylum officers in 5 RAIO Foundations training classes.
  - Approximately 150 additional asylum officers finished Foundations by Thanksgiving and will finish asylum-specific training by the end of the calendar year.

- We are continuing our ambitious schedule throughout FY 2023 to train new asylum officers and increase our capacity to interview asylum applicants and conduct protection screenings.
- Beth, I will now hand it to you for an update on our affirmative asylum backlog reduction efforts.

### **Backlog – Beth Mura**

- Thank you, Brooke. Good afternoon, everyone.
- Some of you may remember me from my role as the asylum operations branch chief.
- I've been in a new senior advisor role coordinating affirmative asylum backlog reduction across the Asylum Division since July 2022.
- I'm excited to be here today to provide an update and hear your ideas, recommendations, and concerns.
- Before we get to the listening session portion of this event, I want to give everyone background and updates on the affirmative asylum backlog to make sure we all fully understand where we are currently.
- **FY 2022 year-end stats**
  - FY 2022 was another busy year for the Asylum Program. Receipts returned to or exceeded pre-pandemic levels.
  - During FY 2022, we received a record number of asylum applications: USCIS received **over 202,000 affirmative asylum applications** in FY 2022. (This number may be even higher as USCIS continues to work through the paper Form I-589 intake front log.) As of November 15, 2022, we had **607,651 total asylum applications pending**.
  - The current increase in receipts is a result of new developments, particularly a significant surge in applications filed by Cuban and Venezuelan nationals, who made up approximately 42% of total FY 2022 receipts.
    - Between FY 2021 and FY 2022, asylum applications from Cuban nationals increased from approximately **2,800 to 45,700** (which is a 1,500% increase) while asylum applications from Venezuelan nationals increased from **9,200 to 35,000** (which is a 280% increase).
    - Approximately 70% of Cuban and Venezuelan applicants filed from Florida.
  - In addition, during FY 2022, we received more than 68,300 credible fear cases, 6,900 reasonable fear cases, 16,600 Migrant Protection Protocols cases, and more than 570 Asylum Merits Interview cases.
- **Scheduling priorities**
  - USCIS remains committed to scheduling new affirmative asylum interviews under the Last In, First Out policy, or LIFO, which is effective at slowing the growth of affirmative asylum receipts and the pending caseload.
  - In FY 2022, we also allocated resources, including new staff hired using the 2022 appropriations, to complete our oldest cases, filed on or before January 31, 2018.

We will keep doing this in future while we generally maintain LIFO scheduling priorities.

- We made steady progress towards finalizing our oldest asylum cases, completing an average of 1,200 of our oldest cases each month throughout FY 2022. In total, we completed approximately 14,495 of our oldest cases.
- Overall, in FY 2022, we conducted more than 29,000 asylum interviews and completed more than 41,000 cases.
- We continue to seek the right balance between working the oldest cases and maintaining LIFO scheduling priorities.
- We will also continue to expedite interview scheduling on a case-by-case basis for emergency or urgent humanitarian reasons, such as for applicants whose eligible dependents (spouses or unmarried children under the age of 21) remain in their country of origin and are at risk.
- **Appropriations Hiring**
  - With FY 2022 funding we received from Congress, we continue to hire and train staff to address the asylum backlog.
  - As of October 21, we have 65% of 152 backlog positions filled, with 14 individuals in the final stages of the hiring process before entering on duty. Of the asylum officer positions, 63%, or 53 positions, are filled.
  - The appropriations backlog staff in each office varies by number and position depending on the office's needs.
  - As we bring more Congressionally-funded staff on board, we will make more progress completing our oldest pending cases.
- **Facilities**
  - In addition to looking for temporary space in some circuit ride locations, we are also working to open new asylum offices and expand existing space in current asylum offices.
  - We have approval to build new asylum offices in Dallas, estimated for September 2023; Seattle, estimated for November 2024; and Denver, estimated for January 2025.
  - We also have ongoing facilities projects for new offices in Atlanta, estimated second quarter of FY 2023, and San Antonio, estimated November 2023, and an additional interview location in Queens, New York, for the New York Asylum Office, with projected occupancy in February 2024.
  - We are also making good progress on the Asylum Vetting Center in Atlanta, with an occupancy target of the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of FY 2023, and on the Tampa Asylum Office's move to their permanent space in May 2023.
- **Efficiencies**
  - In addition to hiring staff, expanding facilities, and focusing on completing the oldest cases, we seek to make the adjudications process more efficient while maintaining the integrity of the immigration system. I will share some examples:
  - For example, we are working to digitize more of the asylum application process.

- John mentioned online asylum filing, which successfully launched to the public in November 2022, and was the result of years of planning and effort.
- We are also transitioning receipt of paper asylum applications from the service centers to the Lockbox; converting backlog asylum files to digital files for adjudication; and enhancing our case management system to assist adjudicators with the interview and decision-making processes.

These efforts will reduce or eliminate manual data entry and the management of paper files and give us insight into steps or redundancies that delay application processing. Using technology, processes, and efficiencies that were developed for online processing across all asylum applications—new and old—will largely eliminate differences in administrative tasks between paper and electronic files so asylum offices can be more productive.

- Additionally, the Asylum Vetting Center in Atlanta should be fully operational in FY 2023. We are completing construction and hiring and training additional staff. We expect the center will deliver interview-ready files to asylum offices so field resources can focus on interviewing and completing application adjudications instead of conducting necessary, but time-consuming, pre-interview adjudication processes. This is another step that is the result of years of planning and effort.
- Further, USCIS and our partners convened two working groups with division-wide participation to examine streamlining pre-interview processes and post-interview decision making and documentation and conducting focused interviews. The working groups identified challenges, discussed solutions, and made recommendations for implementation. As recommendations for streamlined processes are adopted, we will share these efficiencies with you at future engagements.
- **Asylum Backlog Website**
  - We are finalizing an asylum-specific backlog webpage that will provide new and improved information to applicants and representatives about our progress toward reducing the affirmative asylum backlog and what to expect while waiting for an asylum interview. Please check [uscis.gov/asylum](https://uscis.gov/asylum). After the initial launch of the webpage, we plan to develop additional content and want to hear your feedback.
- **Dismissals of proceedings by immigration judges**
  - USCIS is actively working to issue public instructions to address asylum filings by individuals whose removal proceedings in immigration court were dismissed. We hope to have instructions on our website soon.