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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

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HOUSE SELECT COMMITTEE
ON THE CLIMATE CRISIS

June 8, 2021

Tracy Renaud
Office of Legislative Affairs
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 20 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington DC 20001

Dear Ms. Renaud,

I am writing to request that the Asylum Headquarters consider a rule change to allow asylum interviews to occur via video. It is my understanding that the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has been using video for naturalization interviews to comply with Covid restrictions as well as backlogs, and I believe that asylum officers should have access to the same protocols.

Two of our Boulder, CO constituents, Mohamad Al Chukr and his wife, have had a pending asylum case since 2015 and are still waiting for their interviews to be scheduled. Mr. Al Chukr is 67 years old, and his wife is 60 years old. Their health has been in decline and, as such, they have been unable to attend funerals of family members in Syria. Their daughters and grandchildren live outside the US, and they have not seen them for years. Two of our Lafayette, CO constituents are sisters from India, who have had pending asylum claims since 2016. Due to their mother's declining health, their interviews were originally expedited. However, Tenzin Khechok and Kunchok Dolma's interviews were not scheduled in Denver until March 2020. Now, these interviews have been postponed indefinitely.

In March 2020, the Houston Asylum Office stopped scheduling circuit rides to Colorado, and there is currently no plan or timeline for restarting them. Conducting these interviews remotely should be the logical solution to this problem. There is no need to keep families waiting for an additional 1-2 years, with no end in sight, while USCIS begins conducting remote interviews for other purposes. As my office understands it, this change will require the involvement of field office staff and interviewing equipment/space to be made available, as well as a rule change.

I urge you to consider changing this rule as soon as possible. Video interviews for asylum seekers should immediately be instituted, and the statutes that require in-person appearances of applicants before an asylum officer, and all family members included in the asylum application, must be waived.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Joe Neguse".

Joe Neguse
Member of Congress



**U.S. Citizenship
and Immigration
Services**

July 7, 2021

The Honorable Joe Neguse
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Neguse:

Thank you for your June 8, 2021 letter regarding the interview process for affirmative asylum applicants with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) during the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19).

The health and safety of our workforce and communities remains a top priority. Across all USCIS offices, the agency has taken necessary measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. This included temporarily suspending in-person services for a few months in 2020 and taking a phased approach to reopening in order to follow the necessary health and safety protocols in accordance with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance. Some locations that have been severely impacted by COVID-19 must adhere to stricter local guidelines. As a result, USCIS' capacity to conduct interviews has been limited due to restrictions and procedural changes necessary to comply with health, safety, and social distancing protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Your letter mentioned the personal situation of some of your constituents. Asylum applications are confidential under immigration law, and we may not discuss information contained in or pertaining to asylum applications, including whether an individual has filed an application, unless accompanied by a privacy release. However, I certainly recognize the difficulties that many individuals are facing due to the pandemic, other global events, and restrictions on travel.

While we cannot comment on individual cases, we can share some general information about how USCIS is currently using video interviews to adjudicate cases. More specifically during the COVID-19 national emergency, USCIS has responded swiftly and innovatively to adapt and leverage existing systems and resources, in addition to creating new ways to accomplish mission critical work.


In your letter, you referenced video interviews for naturalization interviews. To clarify, the video options being tested at USCIS were developed collaboratively for the affirmative asylum and naturalization interviews, with the offices exchanging best practices regarding processes and technology. Individuals participate in the interviews from separate rooms within the building.

You also expressed your support for further expanding remote capabilities. I agree with you – and future expansions and enhancements, including having the applicant and interviewing officer located in different locations, are actively being examined.¹

We are committed to improving efficiencies, reducing barriers to our legal immigration system, and decreasing processing delays. The USCIS staff is working tirelessly to achieve these results. USCIS has begun video-facilitated asylum interviews in limited circuit ride locations where the location-specific conditions allow for it. USCIS is actively evaluating and planning for the resumption of circuit ride interviews in additional locations, whether in-person or video-facilitated, while considering all applicable guidance on travel and occupancy capacity during the pandemic.

Thank you again for your letter and interest in this important issue. Should you require any additional assistance, please have your staff contact the USCIS Office of Legislative Affairs at (240) 721-3801.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tracy L. Renaud". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Tracy L. Renaud
Acting Director

¹ USCIS is unable to waive the statutory requirements at INA § 208(d)(5)(A)(i) and INA § 208(d)(5)(A)(ii) and (v).