

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

October 20, 2022

District Director Greg Collett
Baltimore Field Office
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services
3701 Koppers Street
Halethorpe, MD 21227

Dear Director Collett,

As members of the Maryland Congressional Delegation, we write to you in your capacity as District Director of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Baltimore Field Office (USCIS Baltimore Field Office) with regard to the office's average service times and responsiveness. Declines on both fronts in recent years are negatively affecting the people of Maryland, and we are concerned that processing times for the critical services the office provides lag significantly behind other comparable field offices across the country. We are committed to understanding the issues facing the USCIS Baltimore Field Office and working with you to better assist the constituents we serve.

We recognize that the past few years have been particularly challenging for USCIS nationwide. The agency has had to work through considerable changes in policies and priorities while also dealing with the implications of COVID-19 and managing increases in application receipt and humanitarian-based needs. During public meetings and congressional briefings, the agency has cited staffing and attrition as a leading challenge. We appreciate that USCIS Director Ur Jaddou has made it a priority to reduce application processing times and backlogs.

There are significant delays in processing numerous immigration benefits adjudicated by the USCIS Baltimore Field Office, such as family, employment and asylum-based I-485 applications, I-130 petitions, and I-751 applications. We applaud USCIS's effort to redistribute the workload of I-485s nationally across field offices to create more uniform processing times for employment-based I-485 applications. However, public data suggests that the USCIS Baltimore Field Office's processing times lag considerably behind most other field offices across the country. Despite the aforementioned progress on employment-based I-485s, the USCIS Baltimore Field Office is currently processing most such applications in 31.5 months compared to 20 months in the Chicago field office and 19.5 months in the Los Angeles field offices. Additionally, the processing time for family-based I-485s is 34.5 months, compared to 15.5 months in Chicago and 18.5 months in Los Angeles.¹

¹ <https://egov.uscis.gov/processing-times/>

These delays have real, devastating consequences on the lives of individuals, families, and employers in Maryland. Delayed processing times negatively affect our constituents' employment and financial welfare. Marylanders are regularly denied promotions, transfers, or growth opportunities because they have not yet received the benefits for which they applied. Delays create financial and emotional stress for the families and communities of applicants.

A related concern is the deterioration of the USCIS Baltimore Field Office's responsiveness to our constituents and their advocates. This trend pre-dated the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic but has certainly increased during that time period. Responses to constituents and their advocates come slower, if they come at all. When provided, responses are generic and do not respond substantively to the situation presented. We are especially concerned about responsiveness to emergencies. Our offices are often contacted by constituents experiencing life-or-death emergencies with immediate need for travel authorization. These constituents contact USCIS's National Call Center and are advised to await a phone call from the local field office; a call that they never receive.

These conditions have caused an increasing number of applicants to seek assistance from our congressional staffs, who themselves report decreased responsiveness from the USCIS Baltimore Field Office. Congressional staff often need to contact agency staff by phone to discuss sensitive cases or time-sensitive matters, but their calls are frequently not answered or returned. Further, USCIS Baltimore Field Office staff previously provided a substantive, unique explanation of reasons for delays when a case exceeded normal processing times. That information helped provide context to constituents, aid their understanding as to the status of their application(s), and mitigate concerns, follow-up questions, and repeat inquiries on the same topic. However, our staff now often receive only a generic or form response in such cases. This lack of meaningful engagement frustrates our constituents and leaves them with an upsetting lack of information about decisions that are fundamental to their livelihoods. It also restricts the ability of our staff to serve their important role of prioritizing cases, identifying procedural errors, and educating the public about their rights under our laws and regulations.

As Maryland's Congressional delegation, we value our long history of collaboration with your office to best serve our constituents. We look forward to working together to reverse recent trends. Toward that end, we respectfully request that the USCIS Baltimore Field Office implement the steps below. We ask that you respond to the following questions and requests in writing by November 21, 2022.

1. What issues, aside from staffing, are causing these delays? What, if any congressional action is needed to address them?
2. Develop and share a clear and date-specific plan for improving processing times to at least the level of field offices in comparable metropolitan centers. Please address the specific plans for all types of I-485s, I-130, and I-751 applications.
3. Schedule quarterly Congressional meetings with USCIS Baltimore Field Office leadership.

4. Ensure the existence of a dedicated phone line for Congressional staff for urgent and sensitive matters that provides responses within 24-48 hours. Such a line is offered at most other USCIS field offices and service centers.

Sincerely,



Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



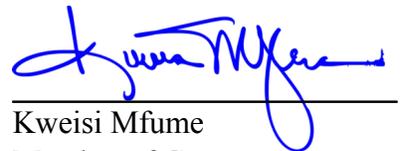
Steny H. Hoyer
Member of Congress



C. A. Dutch Ruppertsberger
Member of Congress



John P. Sarbanes
Member of Congress



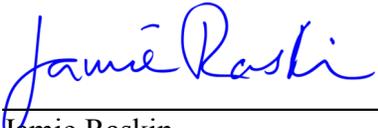
Kweisi Mfume
Member of Congress



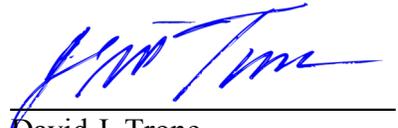
Andy Harris, M.D.
Member of Congress



Anthony G. Brown
Member of Congress



Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress



David J. Trone
Member of Congress

Cc: The Honorable Ur M. Jaddou, Director, USCIS



U.S. Citizenship
and Immigration
Services

Date: November 7, 2022

The Honorable John Sarbanes
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Sarbanes:

Thank you for sharing concerns regarding processing times and information services at the Baltimore Field Office. I, too, value our long history of collaboration and look forward to continuing and strengthening that relationship. I hope that the following information will be useful.

USCIS has been working diligently to reduce processing times across the country. On March 29, 2022, Director Ur Jaddou announced new cycle time goals for our major case types. These goals were established as a critical element of how we collectively measure our success in reducing lengthy processing times. This is a whole-of-agency approach and not solely an adjudication goal. The focus is on how we, as an agency, can reach these target cycle times as quickly as possible with fairness and integrity, while observing our national security and public safety responsibilities. We recognize that the work we do is extremely important—and as you note—all the people we serve rely on us to make decisions on applications, petitions, and requests efficiently and accurately.

To meet these goals, USCIS has already taken several steps. Thanks to congressionally allocated funding in FY22, USCIS authorized overtime and secured resources necessary to support our adjudications staff. We are hiring new staff, with a goal of adding 4,000 new employees nationwide by the end of the calendar year. We have also realized processing efficiencies—allowing the waiver of interviews in some cases and transferring cases to offices with excess capacity. And we are seeking to leverage technology to allow greater efficiency in the processing of individual cases.

We share a common interest in improving processing times across USCIS. As you may know, the processing time displayed on the USCIS website is the amount of time it took to complete 80% of adjudicated cases that were completed in a specific office during the last six months. The processing times illustrated for a specific office will fluctuate based upon the type and age of work completed *during the last six months*. For the past two years, and with a particularly fervent push during the last six months of FY22, the Baltimore office instituted an assertive campaign to drive down aging cases that had accumulated on our shelves. As you can intuitively appreciate, cases that were continued and placed on a shelf at first touch tend to present factual, legal, or policy issues that can be more complex or time consuming to complete than typical, new filings. Unfortunately, our inventory of aged cases accumulated during the pandemic and a subsequent wave of staff attrition that afflicted all offices but particularly Baltimore given our proximity to many federal job opportunities in the D.C. area. To redress this situation, we targeted and prioritized for completion in FY22 nearly 5,000 aged cases, representing 32.1% of the actionable inventory. With support from our sister offices in District S21 (Fairfax, Norfolk, Raleigh, and Charlotte), we made significant progress during FY22 and reduced our aged holdings by over 75% in Baltimore.

The elevated Baltimore processing times currently reported on the public website evinces this recent investment in accumulated aged cases. In FY23, we will continue to invest heavily in a residual inventory of aged cases. This strategy is both necessary and working as intended. Our sister offices continue to support the Baltimore office, including through virtual/video naturalization interviews. At the same time, we are diligently hiring and training new officers to have the confidence to make decisions in the first instance, without unnecessary continuations. As we clear

the shelves of these cases and can dedicate more of our capacity to newer filings, and as our new hires are trained up and fully productive, our posted processing times will drop. In the meantime, I hope this explanation helps to contextualize the processing times as posted on the public website.

Next, you noted a deterioration in informational services to applicants and congressional offices. Nationwide in FY22, USCIS received approximately 180,000 Congressional inquiries, roughly a 50% increase from typical years. The Baltimore Field Office received 1,898 inquiries, a 71% increase over the previous fiscal year. Despite the large increase in queries, our average response time in Baltimore was 20 calendar days.

We have a dedicated team in Baltimore that assiduously tracks and responds to incoming queries from multiple channels. Moreover, we regularly meet with a broad range of stakeholders, including staffers from your congressional offices, during which we answer myriad questions about all aspects of our mission delivery. To be sure, advocates routinely inquire about processing times and would prefer faster adjudications. But we've never heard from our many stakeholders (including congressional offices), who are collegial but not shy about raising concerns, that we are not responding to their queries. That said, we appreciate hearing of this concern here and look forward to meeting with your staff in the weeks ahead to learn more about what informs that perception. I encourage your staff to provide specific examples that we can research to determine if there is a gap in our tracking and response procedures.

As to the substance of query responses, we appreciate the perception that templated responses may be deemed "generic." To promote efficiency and consistency, USCIS and other entities rely upon templates which tend to repeat language that your staff may have seen many times over the years. In some cases, an application may involve public safety, national security, fraud, or other issues that we cannot share specifically without jeopardizing an investigation or the pursuit of pertinent information. In most instances, however, we have little additional information to provide other than the case is pending and will be completed as soon as we can.

To address this concern about template responses, USCIS' Office of Legislative Affairs (OLA) conducted a survey in January 2022 of congressional offices. Based upon the survey results, OLA began updating many of the templates it uses when responding to congressional inquiries. These updated templates prompt our Congressional Liaisons to include appropriate information that is specific to the case. The additional information should help your staff articulate the state of an application and next steps. Additionally, we welcome your recommendations of further improvements in the information provided.

In response to the last two requests, I want to review the existing channels of communication and engagement available to your staffers. We have a longstanding, dedicated phone line for your staffers to reach my team in Baltimore as well as the S21 District Congressional Lead. We closely monitor the line for messages and strive to return phone calls by the next business day. Next, we host quarterly stakeholder meetings that are open to community-based organizations, professional organizations, and congressional staff. Presently, a few of your delegation's staffers attend these meetings, and we welcome greater participation so they can make us aware of concerns such as those raised in your delegation letter.

In addition to those existing channels, I think it would be beneficial for us to host a dedicated meeting with your offices, to include your district or state managers, to better understand your concerns, discuss your observations, and identify solutions. I and the S21 district leadership team welcome an opportunity to meet in November or early December at the Baltimore field office. Ms. Efiemi Newman or Ms. Shapel Lee will contact your offices to schedule this meeting.

Thank you for bringing your concerns to my attention.

Sincerely,



Gregory L. Collett
Field Office Director