

Spring 2019 Immigration Law Nationwide (IMMLAW) Conference Summary

USCIS' Field Operations Directorate (FOD) and Service Center Operations Directorate (SCOPS) are employing a variety of tactics to improve efficiencies in order to reduce adjudication backlogs. While both directorates have increased personnel, a new adjudications officer needs at least 9 to 12 months to be fully trained. So increased hiring is not the only tool needed to reduce backlogs.

FOD has started to rework its business model in order to become more agile. One example is that InfoPass appointments have been phased out at about 50 Field Offices to date. In their place, FOD is promoting the use of self-service applications on the USCIS website. Applicants can now use online tools to check their case status or to check processing times. These individuals are finding the information they seek much faster online than when they made an InfoPass appointment and came into a Field Office to ask an adjudications officer at the counter. By reducing in-person traffic by 70% at Field Offices, we've been able to reassign 70% of the officers at the counter to adjudicative duties. For those individuals who actually need in-person service (for instance, they urgently need a document), they are being serviced much quicker than in the past. Also, non-adjudication officers are now administering English and Civics tests at the counter, freeing up officers for more substantive duties.

SCOPS faces similar challenges, but unlike FOD, does not interview applicants. Policy changes tend to add complexity to the adjudications process, which can prolong processing times. In response to volume surges, SCOPS has continued to transfer workloads from Service Center to Service Center as warranted. SCOPS is moving away from its "sister center" model by which two service centers would be paired with similar workloads. Since a given workload may have been adjudicated at only two service centers, there wasn't much leeway in shifting workloads in response to surges. SCOPS is moving toward an enterprise approach whereby each of the five service centers will eventually handle most workloads. The advantage is that there will be more agility to adapt to workload surges. Additionally, with USCIS' move to a digital environment, we envision the day when an officer at any service center will select the next case in the queue of a given workload and adjudicate it—regardless of the physical location of a file or the applicant's/petitioner's location.

On the H-1B front, we just completed the first part of this year's H1B cap season by running the lottery. This year we switched the order of the selection (regular cap first and then advanced degree cap). This was designed to increase the number of H1Bs for advanced degree beneficiaries. It seems to have been successful as this year we saw an 11% increase in advanced degree beneficiaries being selected in the lottery. Starting next year, we will change the way this selection is made which will streamline our processing as only those pre-selected through an online registration system will file H1B petitions.