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Prepared Remarks (Note: Director May Deviate)
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Good afternoon. I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude to Doris (Meissner) for those kind words of introduction and to the organizers of today's panel discussion for inviting me to participate. Thank you very much.

I know that this has been billed as "A Conversation with Eduardo Aguirre," but as I look at the other panelists and audience members I can't help but think it should have been called "A Conversation *for* Eduardo Aguirre." There is so much that I could learn just by listening to those of you in this room. Your expertise in and experience dealing with immigration issues are unsurpassed, making it a shame that we have only an hour and a half together.

Hopefully, this is just the beginning of what will be a long, fruitful relationship with the Migration Policy Institute, and I don't say that just because it would benefit me. Even more important are the benefits such a partnership would produce for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. I firmly believe that the success of the agency will hinge, in large part, on our ability to forge productive partnerships with the Institute and other organizations experienced in immigration issues. No one can offer a better assessment of how CIS is doing and how we can do better. I will depend on you to be frank, yet fair, and I promise to do the same.

We already have two cornerstones for the foundation of such a partnership, a shared understanding that this great Nation owes much of its vitality to the contributions of legal immigrants and a mutual desire to maintain America's globally celebrated tradition of embracing newcomers.

We also recognize that there exists today a complex and challenging balance between the legacy of this past and the reality of our present.

The second Anniversary of 9/11 is eight days away. That infamous day redefined America. As Secretary Ridge stated just yesterday, "we would... if we could... rewrite history – and never know the pain and peril that so beset this nation... yet we would never take back the coming together of community and country that has so emboldened this nation."

We find inspiration and reverence from September 11th in unique and personal ways. I am particularly moved by the many stories of Legacy INS personnel in the New York District Office, approximately six blocks from ground zero. That morning, 350 employees showed up for work. They experienced firsthand what we witnessed on television.

What went untold, however, is that senior staff returned to work on September 13th out of the Garden City Office, and the District Office reopened within the freeze zone around ground zero two weeks later.

The District Office's communications infrastructure played an important role in coordination, response and recovery efforts. Similarly, our human infrastructure was vital. The leadership and proactive personnel of Legacy INS conveyed messages of resilience and hope to everyone with whom they came into contact.

Employees joined the Family Assistance Program efforts on Pier 94, aiding survivors and those who lost loved ones. They established a booth to answer immigration related questions, assist families from abroad and comfort individuals who simply needed a shoulder.

Over the week ahead, as a nation, we will recall the countless stories of heroism that we know well and learn of untold acts by patriots and Samaritans alike; each of whom played an important part in that day, and every day since. I am proud of our employees in the New York District and Garden City Offices. They exhibited courage and strength in a time of uncertainty and confusion.

My management philosophy is that we must earn our stripes each day. Though I held a different post on September 11, 2001, I contend that the fine people of both Offices earned their stripes, and I applaud them for getting a tough job done.

Today is my 187th day on the job, for anyone who wonders if I keep count. My first six months have reinforced for me that – though the learning curve is significant, my past history as a quick study gives me the confidence to seize every opportunity to learn directly from those who understand the issues, the problems, and the potential solutions. I am leaning heavily on the 15,000 men and women who work for the agency, meeting with them as often as possible in order to tap their formidable knowledge and experience.

My education has been aided by my strong sensitivity to immigration issues. I know what it is like to be an immigrant; I am one. I arrived in the United States as a 15-year-old Cuban refugee with no family, no money, and no working knowledge of the English language. I followed in the footsteps of millions of others who have come to America from another country in search of freedom, in search of opportunity, in search of a better life. I found all three, for which I am grateful beyond words.

An inherent sensitivity to immigrants' concerns isn't all that I bring to the job. Before coming to CIS, I served as vice chairman and chief operating officer of the Export-Import Bank of the United States, and prior to that I worked in commercial banking for more than three decades. In addition to allowing me to hone my managerial and leadership skills, these experiences instilled in me a deep commitment to customer service and an understanding of risk management.

By drawing on my experience both as an immigrant and as an executive, I have been able to create what is perhaps the most important thing I bring to the Bureau - a clear, workable vision for its future. I envision an organization that will deliver world-class service in a consistent and timely manner nationwide. We will reduce backlogs while strengthening the security of our application processes. We will enhance the integrity of our legal immigration system, and in the process we will earn further public support for immigration services.

I am very encouraged knowing that my vision for CIS is shared by many people; not just here in this room but across the country, and that includes the White House. As President Bush stressed in his blueprint for reforming America's immigration system, "This Administration believes that legal immigrants should be greeted with open arms, rather than endless lines. We must be responsive to those who seek to immigrate to this country by legal means, and to those who have emigrated and now seek to become U.S. citizens."

The President put his words into action by launching a five-year, \$500-million initiative aimed at providing high-quality service to all legal immigrants. It incorporates a universal six-month standard for processing all applications for benefits. I am eager to do my part by leading Citizenship and Immigration Services in fulfilling the President's goal.

I recognize that many people, while fully supportive of this goal, believe that our efforts to achieve it will be hindered by the fact that CIS is part of the Department of Homeland Security.

This belief appears to be based on the concern that in their new home immigration services will be further eclipsed by enforcement activities. I firmly believe that the opposite is true. Services now have a higher profile than ever before, and no longer languish in the shadow of immigration enforcement.

You need look no further than the Department's organization chart to see that, as head of CIS, my rank is equivalent to an Undersecretary and I report to Secretary Ridge through Deputy Secretary England. None of the agencies housing enforcement components of the former INS enjoy such a direct line to the top levels of Homeland Security.

Receiving attention from the highest levels of the Administration is critical, but what really fuels my optimism about the future of CIS is not what I hear from those to whom I answer; it is what I hear and see from those who answer to me. From my first day on the job, it was obvious to me that no one is more committed to making CIS a world-class service agency than the men and women working there. And they back their earnest resolve to improve operations with a remarkable amount of energy, creativity and wisdom.

At my inaugural meeting with senior management, we all agreed that our first actions should be identifying and defining common values that could guide all activities at all levels of the agency. Core values are crucial for building the kind of service structure our customers demand and deserve. It didn't take us long to settle on three—integrity, respect, and ingenuity. I discovered why we were able to do this so quickly when I began sharing these core values with employees during visits to the field; they weren't new. Many workers had already embraced these values and used them to guide their work every day.

The men and women of CIS clearly understand the need to always strive for the highest level of integrity when dealings with customers, fellow employees, and fellow Americans. They are also mindful of the importance of the trust placed in them to administer laws and regulations fairly and honestly.

Respect comes from recognizing the inherent dignity of each person, and it is demonstrated by treating customers, co-workers, and associates with courtesy, compassion, and fairness. With respect comes empowerment, and I firmly believe that people should be empowered to make decisions within proper parameters. CIS cannot afford to have employees frozen by the fear of making a mistake. Finding solutions to the many challenges we face will require calculated, well-informed risk taking.

To address challenges successfully, CIS will also have to work more efficiently, and that is that is where ingenuity becomes so essential. Whether we realize our vision of a world-class service organization will hinge in large part on our ability to harness the latest technological innovations.

Case-in-point, the electronic-filing program we launched late last month. Now, for the first time, our customers can file the two most commonly used applications online, the green card replacement or renewal and for employment authorization forms. They alone account for 30 percent of the 7 million applications we receive annually. That is just the beginning, however. We expect to have 90 percent of all immigration forms available for online filing by the end of FY 2005.

E-filing provides our customers with simpler, more convenient service—they can file online 24 hours a day, seven days a week—without compromising the integrity or security of the application process. So far we have received more than 30,000 applications.

Of course, simplifying filing processes will accomplish little unless we simultaneously address the application backlog. And, we are doing that. At a strategic planning session with senior manager in early May, I established a team to identify the immediate changes that would

do the most to speed up the adjudication process, while enhancing security. I also asked them to develop implementation plans to put these changes in place as soon as possible.

Of all the possible projects identified, eight were selected as having the greatest potential to produce a major improvement, and they are now under intensive study. These initiatives are:

- 1) Streamlining the family-based adjustment of status process;
- 2) Pre-certifying businesses that file petitions on behalf of employees;
- 3) Eliminating self-imposed requirements that inhibit processing or that create more work, such as the one-year limit on Employment Authorization Document validity;
- 4) Improving processes leading to immigration benefit documents or cards by collecting biometrics at Application Support Centers and redefining adjudication of applications for certain benefits documents to institute verification of identify;
- 5) Reducing lines at our local offices;
- 6) Implementing the Child Citizenship Act;
- 7) Streamlining Naturalization Quality Procedures; and,
- 8) Implementing batch processing for Employment Work Authorization applications (I-765).

At the same time, we also continue to update the more comprehensive backlog reduction plan that was put together prior to the tragic events of September 11, 2001 --a plan that did not, and could not, take into account the security checks we instituted in response to the terrorist attacks. Security screening has caused major delays in the processing of applications. While we make no apologies for the new procedures, we are making every effort to ensure that they are carried out as expeditiously as possible, and dramatic progress is being made.

The adjudication of applications isn't our only activity affected by new security measures implemented in the wake of September 11. They have also had a major impact on the processing of refugees, who are now subject to stricter screening, including name checks and relationship verification. As a result of this enhanced security, there have been delays in overseas processing. CIS has been working with the State Department and our other partners in the U.S. Refugee Program to streamline the new security requirements. We are also working together to improve the responsiveness and quality of the resettlement program overall.

One of the most important steps CIS can take is to end our reliance on temporary duty officers by creating a permanent, dedicated corps of refugee officers. We are working with the Department of Homeland Security to incorporate our resource requirements for the refugee corp. in our FY05 budget.

CIS is, of course, responsible for adjudicating affirmative asylum claims, those filed by individuals who are in the United States and not in removal proceeding. In this area, our Asylum Program is looking to build on the successful reforms that were instituted when Doris Meissner was INS Commissioner. These reforms resulted in a significant decrease in the filing of frivolous applications and a very dramatic increase in productivity. The increase in productivity has, among other things, allowed our asylum officers to make major progress in addressing the application backlog, progress we need to continue.

Speaking of asylum, I would also like to note that the statutory cap on asylum adjustments, which limits CIS to granting law permanent status to no more than 10,000 asylees

each year, is currently under review. As of July, more than 140,000 asylees had applied for adjustment of status, meaning that someone applying for adjustment today could wait for as long as 14 years before a slot is available.

It is important to remember, however, that the statutory limitation is a function of monitoring overall immigrant admissions.

If Congress eventually lifts the cap, it would eventually lead to a surge in naturalization applications, as lawful permanent status puts people on the final road to citizenship. But that doesn't worry me much; if we get there, CIS will be ready. Some of the most notable progress that we have made has been in our work connected to citizenship. It is also the area where we have some of our most ambitious and exciting plans for the future.

Within weeks of coming into existence, CIS launched a pilot project aimed at standardizing testing for citizenship applicants. We want to devise a test that is fair, consistent, and meaningful for applicants nationwide. By doing so, we aim to create a level playing field for all those seeking to become new Americans. The first phase of this project focuses on the English proficiency section of the test. We will next move to redesigning the U.S. government and history portions, and, if all goes as planned, a new citizenship test will be in place by the end of next year.

There is no question that we need to improve naturalization procedures and processes. Applicants experience too many delays and detours on the road to citizenship. However, making their journey smoother and swifter is not enough. We also must make sure that new citizens understand their civic responsibilities and are prepared to fulfill them.

The federal government, unfortunately, largely abandoned its citizenship education efforts during the Vietnam War era. It is time to revive them. In fact, it is long overdue. Congress recognized this when it passed the Homeland Security Act of 2002, which mandates that an Office of Citizenship be set up within CIS. We are now in the process of doing that.

The office will be responsible for encouraging eligible persons to apply for citizenship and preparing them to meet both the requirements for citizenship and the responsibilities that come with it. A vital part of its work will be identifying barriers that prevent immigrants from becoming active participants in U.S. civic society. We are sure to be calling on the MPI as we move ahead because you have among the pioneers in examining how to promote the inclusion and integration of new citizens.

The initiatives I have outlined only hint at what CIS is doing to provide our customers with the high-quality service they desire and deserve. Even so, I firmly believe they show that seeds of success have been planted. I look forward to working with you to ensure that these seeds take root and flourish. Thank you.

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