



Issue Brief

Making the Fee Structure of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services More Transparent

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The Issue: USCIS Lacks Funding to Carry Out Activities Expected of It.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is one of the only government agencies that receives virtually no appropriations from Congress. Most of its funding comes from fees paid by U.S. citizens, U.S. businesses, and immigrants who pay the agency to process their applications for some immigration benefit, such as a work visa.

However, the agency does much more than process the applications of fee-paying customers. It is charged with ensuring national security as it relates to immigration. It processes the applications of persons fleeing prosecution and who are provided refuge by our government. It provides special services to immigrants serving in our armed forces, and processes their applications for citizenship without charge. These agency activities are paid for through what is essentially a hefty surtax on each application filed by fee-paying U.S. citizen, business, and immigrant applicant.

Fee Reform: Matching Costs and Services

In recent years, the Administration has begun to ask for Congressional appropriations to pay for the processing of refugee and asylum applications, for the processing of the citizenship applications of those in our armed forces, and for other functions.

In Fiscal Year 2010, Congress allocated \$50 million for the processing of refugee and asylum applications. Through a combination of directly appropriated funds and reprogramming, USCIS obtained \$50 million for the processing of refugee and asylum applications in Fiscal Year 2011. While this amount represents approximately a quarter of what is needed, it has mitigated fee increases by reducing the size of the surtax on applications for other immigration benefits.

The House Appropriations Bill: A Retreat on Fee Reform

On May 24th, the House Appropriations Committee marked up the Homeland Security spending bill for the Government's Fiscal Year 2012. The bill would cut *all* of the requested funding (\$203.4 million) for the processing of refugee and asylum applications. This would reverse efforts to reform immigration application fees so that they more closely track the cost of service provided by USCIS.

The Administration's Appropriations Requests Should be Supported

Refugee and asylum status is provided by the government for persons seeking refuge in the U.S. The costs of meeting our international and humanitarian obligations to refugees should be shared more broadly. Congress should not force the agency to raise the surtax on immigration applications.

The spending bill should include the amount requested by the Administration for processing refugee and asylum applications. This will help stabilize the funding for USCIS and will advance efforts to bring fees in line with the cost of processing applications.