

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

March 28, 2019

L. Francis Cissna  
Director  
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services  
20 Massachusetts Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20529

Dear Director Cissna,

As you know, the greater Houston metropolitan area is among the fastest-growing and most diverse regions in the United States. We value the contributions to our economic strength that come from that diversity. However, we have increasingly seen a hindrance to our region's future—the inability of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services to act in a timely way to serve the Houston area.

As you may be aware, according to your own agency's data, the average time for an I-485 or "green card" application in the Houston area is currently 19.5 to 24 months. In the Los Angeles area, that same application is processed in as little as 13.5. A resident of Queens, New York could have this same application approved, on average, in as little as 12.5 months. In diverse cities like San Bernardino, California the difference is even worse, with I-485 processing running as little as 7.5 months.<sup>1</sup>

We face a similar story for N-400 Applications for Naturalizations, with wait times running from 17 months to 21.5 months in the Houston area in comparison to the far shorter 9.5 months in Los Angeles, 10.5 months in Queens, New York. A resident of Long Island, New York could receive approval within 7.5 to 12 months—their maximum wait time. This is five months less than the Houston area's *minimum* wait time. While these numbers might vary, the common conclusion is that the Houston USCIS office lags significantly behind those cities with more and better staffed facilities.

Likewise, our area has seen a considerable slowdown in USCIS processing of Emergency Advanced Parole documents for those who are contributing to the Houston economy but find themselves needing to travel abroad under emergency scenarios. Instead of a rapid response from USCIS staff, constituents have reported that must now work through an untimely labyrinth of contractors before being considered for "emergency" relief. This is unacceptable bureaucracy.

These delays have put significant burdens on the casework staff of our offices and hindered our ability to help constituents dealing with not only your agency, but the host of other agencies we work with. More importantly, it has put a burden on those who live and work in our community and want nothing more than to follow the law. Immigration is a key aspect of our region's economic growth, and USCIS' ability to act in a timely way is imperative to supporting that growth.

Given these concerns, we request information on the following areas to help us better consider upcoming oversight and appropriations efforts in the House of Representatives.

1. How do USCIS resources (staffing *and* offices) in Houston compare to the other largest cities in the United States?
2. What actions has USCIS taken to improve response times in the Houston area? What further actions can be taken in the future?
3. Do you need additional statutory direction or funding to better respond in a timely way?
4. What changes has USCIS made in the Houston area in the handling of Emergency Advanced Parole requests, and do you believe these applications are being handled on a truly "emergency" basis?

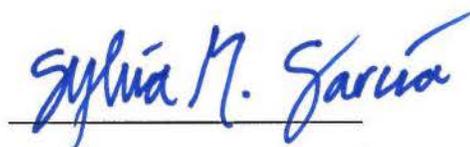
Again, thank you for your timely responses to these questions and any further consideration you can give to the resources you provide to the Houston area.

Very respectfully,



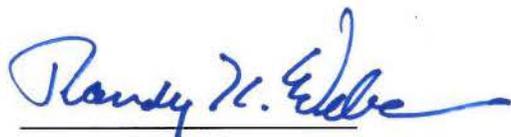
Pete Olson

Member of Congress



Sylvia Garcia

Member of Congress



Randy K. Weber

Member of Congress



Sheila Jackson Lee

Member of Congress



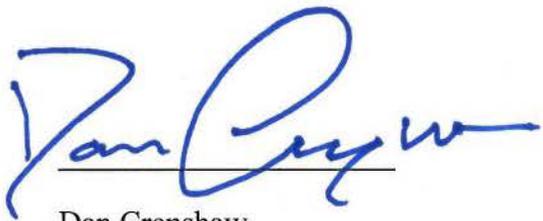
Brian Babin, D.D.S.

Member of Congress



Lizzie Fletcher

Member of Congress



Dan Crenshaw

Member of Congress



Kevin Brady

Member of Congress



Michael T. McCaul

Member of Congress



Al Green

Member of Congress

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

U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services  
Office of the Director (MS 2000)  
Washington, DC 20529-2000



U.S. Citizenship  
and Immigration  
Services

April 29, 2019

The Honorable Pete Olson  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Olson:

Thank you for your letter of March 28, 2019, regarding processing delays at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' (USCIS) Houston Field Office. Please find enclosed responses to your questions.

Thank you again for your letter and interest in this important issue. The co-signers of your letter will receive a separate, identical response. Should you require any additional assistance, please have your staff contact the USCIS Office of Legislative and Intergovernmental Affairs at (202) 272-1940.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "L. Francis Cissna".

L. Francis Cissna  
Director

Enclosure

**The Department of Homeland Security's Response to  
Representative Olson's March 28, 2019 Letter**

**1. How do USCIS resources (staffing *and* offices) in Houston compare to the other largest cities in the United States?**

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) utilizes a staffing allocation model to determine the appropriate level of staff in each field office based on current and projected workloads. Under this model, the Houston Field Office is staffed commensurate to other USCIS field offices with similarly sized workloads. Staffing levels of Immigration Services Officers at the Houston Field Office have increased by over 32 percent since the beginning of Fiscal Year (FY) 2017. However, the number of positions allocated to Houston in FY 2018 and FY 2019 has exceeded its current capacity of the facility housing the field office. To ensure the Houston Field Office would be able to hire the number of employees it requires to manage its workload, I approved and funded a project to modify its existing facility to accommodate the needed growth. This project is anticipated to be completed in December 2019.

**2. What actions has USCIS taken to improve response times in the Houston area? What further actions can be taken in the future?**

USCIS is taking a three-pronged approach in the Houston area to improve response times on adjustment of status and naturalization applications. We are increasing staff, increasing production on a per-officer level, and expanding the size and number of naturalization ceremonies in the Houston area.

The Houston Field Office has developed and refined an in-house training program that has helped prepare officers to adjudicate cases within a shorter period of time, while producing high quality decisions. This enables newly hired officers to contribute more quickly after entering on duty.

An internal review of processes was conducted to identify bottlenecks and find ways to increase efficiencies in production. As a result, new workflows and scheduling practices were implemented leading to a substantial increase in interviews. Additionally, in June, the Houston Field Office will begin to schedule N-400 naturalization interviews on Saturdays to further increase capacity.

To ensure that applicants for naturalization are sworn in as citizens in a timely manner, the field office has both increased the size of its naturalization ceremonies and partnered with the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas to increase the overall number of ceremonies. Due to these efforts, naturalizations in the Houston area increased approximately 50 percent from FY 2017 to FY 2018, and are expected to increase another 60 percent to 35,000 in FY 2019. With these and other improvements in place, Houston's cycle times are projected to be at or below 12 months for adjustment of status applications and 11 months for naturalization applications by the end of FY 2019.

**3. Do you need additional statutory direction or funding to better respond in a timely way?**

No, although USCIS appreciates the offer of assistance.

**4. What changes has USCIS made in the Houston area in the handling of Emergency Advanced Parole requests, and do you believe these applications are being handled on a truly "emergency" basis?**

In February 2019, the Houston Field Office joined the national rollout of the USCIS Information Services Modernization program that encourages individuals to use USCIS' online information resources to view general how-to information and resolve case status inquiries instead of travelling to field offices for that information. By leveraging USCIS Contact Center resources and online tools to resolve general inquiries, USCIS is better aligning our resources to provide in-office appointments for applicants who require in-person service, such as those seeking emergency advance parole. Wait times for these in-person services has decreased from approximately 10 days to 5 days as a result of the implementation of the Information Services Modernization program. Further, USCIS can more efficiently handle requests for information online and by phone, which also eliminates a trip to the office for applicants seeking information or case status. Overall, the improved service also allows USCIS to redirect front counter resources to advance our goal of reducing processing times.