

**Talking Points Asylum National Engagement**  
**Wednesday, March 6, 2024**  
**via TEAMS**

## **Opening**

- Thank you, Amanda. As Amanda said, we are happy to have you all here. We look forward to updating you on all that we have accomplished and changes that have occurred since the last engagement and then answering your questions.

## **General Updates**

- It will surprise none of you that there is a lot happening in the Asylum Division.
- This applies not only to the size of our workload, but to the way we manage our operations.
- To start, the bittersweet announcement that three of our asylum office directors have moved on to new positions within the agency, and one has retired:
- Robert Daum and Brett Lassen, the former directors of the Houston Asylum Office and the Tampa Asylum Office, respectively, have been promoted to new positions within the Asylum Division, which we will discuss in more detail momentarily;
- Peter Haertling, the former director of the New Orleans Asylum Office, has moved to the USCIS Office of Chief Counsel;
- And Patricia, or Trish, Menges, the former director of the New York Asylum Office, has retired. We wish her well in this new phase of her life.
- We are excited to now announce the new directors for these four asylum offices:
  - Bryan Hemming is now the director of the Houston Asylum Office. He was previously the deputy director of the Houston Asylum Office and has been acting director since October 2022.
  - LaToya Beck is our new director of the New Orleans Asylum Office. LaToya was previously the deputy director of the New Orleans Asylum Office and has been acting director for the past few months.
  - Our Tampa Asylum Office also has a new director. We are happy to announce Gabriel Garcia-Cay will be moving up to the director position from his previous role as the Deputy Director of the Tampa Asylum Office.
  - Finally, Mat Varghese, former deputy director of the New York Asylum Office, has been selected as the new director of the New York Asylum Office.
- I have some other big news: in line with an overall restructuring of the Refugee, Asylum and International Operations Directorate, the Asylum Division is reorganizing our management structure.
- All of us have watched the Asylum Division grow quickly, in both workload and field staffing, but our management and organizational structure have not kept pace.
- To better manage our workforce and achieve our mission, the Asylum Division will evolve to now have two districts that will oversee the brick-and-mortar asylum offices; one remote district to centralize protection screening work; and one Program Management Office, or PMO.
- District directors will run the two brick-and-mortar districts and oversee our 11 current asylum field offices.
- These districts will focus on workload analysis and resource deployment; statistics and reporting; hiring, recruitment, and onboarding; facilities; labor and employee relations;

communication and change management plans; budget; and employee engagement between the two new districts.

- The brick-and-mortar offices reporting to the districts will continue to handle all in-person work under the Asylum Division's jurisdiction, including affirmative asylum, Asylum Merits Interviews, and the non-detained credible fear and reasonable fear caseloads.
- The remote district will oversee all of the Asylum Division's detained protection screening workload. It will be structured similarly to a USCIS service center, with several divisions led by Associate District Directors.
- The remote district divisions will focus on adjudications, quality and training, data, resource allocation, and mission support functions.
- The PMO will centralize coordination of the efficiency and streamlining concepts that we have discussed.
- This will ensure we are able to create long-term process improvements across the Asylum Division.
- The PMO is proposed as a temporary organization that will transition to a permanent, third brick-and-mortar district when it achieves its operational objectives.
- I am now pleased to announce the people who will be leading these new districts and the PMO:
  - Robert Daum and Eileen Lopez-Tome will lead the two brick-and-mortar districts.
  - Brett Lassen will lead the remote district.
  - And Noël Young will establish and lead the PMO.
- The individuals we have selected to lead our four districts are true leaders with visions for how to move the Asylum Division forward, and we are excited to have them in these inaugural positions.
- One other new position and member of our staff I am happy to announce is Brooke Kirkland.
- She is our new chief of staff, moving into this role from her position as chief of the Quality Assurance Branch at Asylum headquarters.
- I know there have already been a lot of updates, but we do have one more.
- To better recruit candidates capable of performing the work of an asylum officer, we have added an additional career ladder level to the Asylum Officer 2 position.
- The Asylum Officer 2 position will now be a GS-7/9/11/12 position, rather than a GS-9/11/12 position.
- An Asylum Officer without prior experience who we recruit at the GS-7 level will need to hold at least a Bachelor of Arts degree with demonstrated excellent academic achievement.
- They will be required to pass the same training as any asylum officer, and they will be eligible to conduct all the same work, though with greater supervision and mentoring.
- I cannot miss this opportunity to plug this new position to you all and ask that you please keep an eye on USAJobs.gov.
- We anticipate posting a job announcement soon for the Asylum Officer 2 position, which will include this career ladder level. I hope you all will spread the word and encourage all eligible and interested people you may know to apply.

## **Affirmative Asylum Updates**

- Fiscal year 2023 was an extraordinary year, not only in the volume of work, but also in the unparalleled commitment of our workforce.

- That continues into the current fiscal year.
- As of February 14, we have received over 150,000 Form I-589 affirmative asylum applications this fiscal year, with over 1,140,000 applications pending.
- This level of receipts is more or less the same as this time last year.
- This fiscal year, the top five nationalities for affirmative asylum receipts are Venezuela, Colombia, Nicaragua, Haiti, and China.
- Nationals of these five countries together make up approximately 48% of our affirmative asylum receipts.
- Asylum offices' capacity to interview incoming receipts and longer-pending asylum applications depends on multiple factors, including the number of staff assigned to the credible fear and reasonable fear workloads and the division's Operation Allies Welcome, or OAW, workload.

### **OAW Cases**

- Looking at OAW cases specifically, as of February 14, we have received almost 20,500 affirmative asylum applications from OAW parolees, representing almost 40,500 individuals.
- We completed more than 18,700 interviews and over 14,000 adjudications for these cases.
- We are working hard to improve processing times, with a 68% completion rate compared to just 8% at this time last year.
- Of cases completed, we have an approval rate greater than 99%.
- We are committed to adjudicating asylum applications filed by OAW parolees in a timely manner, per congressional mandate and a court-ordered settlement agreement, and we continue to prioritize these cases for interview and completion, including by scheduling asylum interviews in our circuit ride locations throughout the country.

### **Reminders regarding the affirmative asylum program**

- Sticking with the affirmative asylum portfolio, we want to provide some operational reminders.
- USCIS recently issued special filing instructions if EOIR dismissed or terminated removal proceedings and the applicant wants to apply for asylum with USCIS.
- If the applicant was previously in removal proceedings but the proceedings were dismissed or terminated, and they are looking to apply for asylum with USCIS affirmatively, they should submit their application to the Lockbox with jurisdiction over their residence.
- For those cases where the applicant was sent to EOIR by USCIS because the applicant was under the jurisdiction of EOIR, or because USCIS re-filed a previous NTA that was not properly filed and docketed with EOIR, USCIS will adjudicate the newly filed asylum application.
- If USCIS previously denied or referred an asylum application on the merits, or we previously denied or referred an asylum application because the applicant did not comply with USCIS processing requirements (such as biometrics and interview appearances), we will accept a new, complete Form I-589 asylum application filing.
- However, in that circumstance, we intend to issue a new discretionary notice to appear to send the application back to EOIR, so the applicant can continue their asylum request with EOIR.

- You can find these instructions, as well as where to file Form I-589 and what supporting documentation to submit with the application, at [uscis.gov/asylum](https://uscis.gov/asylum).

## **General Filing Tips**

- We also have some general tips around filing that we wanted to share, based on what we see.

### *Pending Applications*

- If the applicant has a pending application, any and all subsequent correspondence and supplemental information must go directly to the asylum office where the case is processing, which can be found using the USCIS Service and Office Locator.
- This includes requests to reschedule biometrics after a no-show, updated Form I-589s, requests to add dependents, etcetera.
- To request a withdrawal of an asylum case, applicants should submit a written request to the asylum office that has jurisdiction over their case.
- All of these requests are only actionable at the local asylum office, where the case is processing, and you must submit them there directly. The Lockbox cannot accept or process supplemental information and withdrawal requests.

### *New Applications Submitted to Lockbox*

- Only newly filed Forms I-589 should be submitted to the Lockbox.
- Unaccompanied children seeking to file affirmatively should file for asylum with the Lockbox with jurisdiction over their residence.
- “*Special Instructions*” Cases
- The Lockbox cannot process filing types that are listed under “Special Instructions” on [uscis.gov/i-589](https://uscis.gov/i-589), and will reject and return them to the applicant.
- Be sure to send all filings under the “Special Instructions” category to the Asylum Vetting Center.

## **Automated Jurisdiction Closures**

- We continue to see noncitizens in removal proceedings filing their Form I-589 with USCIS instead of with EOIR. While Lockbox staff rejects any Form I-589 filed by a noncitizen in removal proceedings (except unaccompanied children), there is currently no mechanism to “reject” a Form I-589 filed online by a noncitizen in removal proceedings. Instead, those cases are accepted but then later administratively closed by Asylum Division staff because USCIS does not have jurisdiction to adjudicate these cases.
- As we continue to develop and implement tools to streamline application processing and strengthen the integrity of the process, we are pleased to announce that we are now able to conduct automatic batch closure of cases where the applicant’s NTA was filed and docketed with EOIR 22 or more days before they filed their Form I-589 with USCIS, freeing up Asylum Division staff to focus on cases we have jurisdiction over and can adjudicate.
- In the coming weeks, we will begin the automatic process of administratively closing the approximately 20,000 pending cases in this posture. This is in addition to the over 16,500 cases in this posture we have already manually closed this fiscal year.

- We are also finalizing the development of the automatic rejection of cases that are filed online and are in the same posture. This will match the existing jurisdictional rejection processes in place at the Lockbox.
- In addition to freeing up staffing resources required to process these erroneously filed applications, these technological developments are an important step to improving the customer experience to ensure that applicants are filing in the correct location.
- Those are all of the affirmative asylum updates we have today.
- I will now turn this over to my colleague to provide updates on our credible fear and reasonable fear programs.

### **Credible Fear and Reasonable Fear Updates**

- Thank you! As with affirmative asylum, USCIS' protection screening work continues to reach historic levels.
- As of February 14, we have received almost 70,000 credible fear referrals so far this fiscal year.
- This fiscal year, the top five nationalities for credible fear receipts are Venezuela, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Colombia.
- Nationals of these five countries together make up approximately 63% of our credible fear receipts.
- As of February 14, we have received over 7,400 reasonable fear referrals so far for FY 2024. This is more than 2/3 of our total reasonable fear referrals received in FY 2023.
- The top five nationalities this fiscal year for reasonable fear receipts are Venezuela, Honduras, Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador.
- Nationals of these five countries together make up approximately 79% of our reasonable fear receipts.

### **Hiring and Recruitment Updates**

- We have continued to hire aggressively to fill all of our existing vacancies.
- Our total authorized staff is currently 2,493 with 1,726 positions filled.
- 794 of 1,097 asylum officer positions are filled, making up approximately 72% of positions.
- Approximately 767 vacancies are remaining, with 525 candidates in the recruitment process.
- We will continue our ambitious schedule throughout FY 2024 to hire and train new asylum officers and new operations staff to increase our capacity to interview and process asylum applicants and conduct protection screenings.

### **Conclusion**

- Those are all of the updates and reminders we have.
- Again, we thank you all for attending this engagement.
- We look forward to answering your questions.