



## **USCIS Offices Resume In-Person Services Engagement**

On June 18, 2020, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Public Engagement Division (PED) held a stakeholder engagement to discuss the reopening of USCIS offices to the public and the agency's resumption of in-person services.

USCIS representatives discussed the agency's response to the coronavirus pandemic, procedures for visiting USCIS facilities, and resuming in-person services at field offices, application support centers, and asylum offices.

Below is a transcript of the prepared remarks.

### **Introduction**

Welcome. Thank you for joining us today for an engagement on the reopening of USCIS offices to the public and the agency resumption of in-person services.

We appreciate so many of you participating through webinar/teleconference.

My name is Carlos Munoz-Acevedo from the Office of Public Engagement.

I am also pleased to introduce my colleagues who will be giving remarks and answering questions later in the engagement:

- Michael Valverde (FOD)
  - Michael Valverde was appointed deputy associate director of the Field Operations Directorate on Sept. 20, 2015. Before his selection, he served in an acting capacity, managing the four regional offices and the National Benefits Center. Within USCIS he served as the deputy chief of the Refugee Affairs Division and as the first RAIO chief of Performance Management and Planning.
- Lee Bowes (IRIS/ASC)
  - Lee Bowes is the deputy associate director of the Immigration Records and Identity Services Directorate. He supports the policies and operations surrounding the collection and use of biometric and background check data, the management of immigration records, and the identity verification of individuals seeking immigration, employment or public benefits.

- Ted Kim (RAIO)
  - Ted Kim has been serving as the deputy associate director of the Refugee Asylum and International Operations Directorate (RAIO) since September 2018. In this role, he oversees the RAIO divisions and program offices in the administration of the asylum and refugee programs, management of USCIS's international offices, and other aspects of RAIO's humanitarian mission. He has previously served as the deputy chief of the Asylum Division at RAIO and the Washington field office director within the Field Operations Directorate.

Before we get started, I would like to issue some quick administrative reminders.

This is a public meeting, but it is not for press purposes.

Information provided by USCIS representatives during this engagement is not intended for media use.

Members of the media who may be joining us today, we ask that if you have questions at the end of today's engagement or need additional information for an on-the-record comment, please call the USCIS Press Office at 202-272-1200.

For any Congressional staffers who have joined, please contact the USCIS Office of Legislative Affairs for any briefing requests. We can provide you with contact information if needed.

You may submit questions to the Public Engagement mailbox during this engagement. The address is: [public.engagement@uscis.dhs.gov](mailto:public.engagement@uscis.dhs.gov). We will select as many questions as we have time to answer live.

During the question and answer session, we ask that you please limit your questions to the topics discussed today. We will not be able to address case-specific questions or issues outside the scope of today's topic.

I wanted to take a moment to acknowledge the current status of USCIS as an agency.

As many of you may have heard, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, USCIS has seen a dramatic decrease in revenue and is seeking a one-time emergency request for funding to ensure we can carry out our mission of administering our nation's lawful immigration system, safeguarding its integrity, and protecting the American people. Importantly, this funding proposal protects American taxpayers by not adding to the deficit and requiring USCIS to pay the money back to the U.S. Treasury.

Without congressional intervention, USCIS will need to administratively furlough approximately 13,400 employees. We previously anticipated the furlough to begin on July 20, but we have identified additional revenue and cost savings that allow us to extend the potential furlough date to August 3 in the event Congress does not provide emergency funding. We continue to have productive discussions with members of Congress and their staff to find a solution to avert this unfortunate consequence.

## **Background**

On March 18, 2020, USCIS temporarily suspended in-person services at our field offices, asylum offices, and application support centers (ASCs) to help slow the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19).

All USCIS offices were closed to the public from March 18 through June 3, 2020.

During the temporary closures, we continued to accept and process applications, petitions, and requests. Agency employees continued to perform all mission-critical work that did not have in-person requirements and offered emergency services on a case-by-case basis.

We issued guidance over the last few months to address many questions and concerns from the public that have arisen due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

You can find all the guidance that the agency issued and the latest COVID-19 related information at [uscis.gov/coronavirus](https://uscis.gov/coronavirus).

## **Reopening**

On June 4, we began to gradually and safely reopen individual domestic offices and resume in-person services.

As offices follow a phased approach to reopening, we are still open for business and performing mission-essential services.

In evaluating how and when to reopen our individual domestic offices, we are following the Guidelines for Opening Up America Again, a three-phased approach based on the advice of public health experts, including the CDC's guidelines, to protect our workforce and the public.

We are implementing safety and health precautions to protect our workforce and all visitors to our facilities. We are coordinating with DHS and health organizations to monitor the situation and will adjust guidance as needed to maintain a safe and healthy work environment.

The purpose of this presentation is to provide information pertaining to the specifics of reopening our field offices, asylum offices, application support centers, and the conducting of naturalization ceremonies.

We are aware that many immigration benefits require in-person services and that timely immigration adjudications are important.

We are therefore reinitiating some in-person services that were temporarily suspended, including, but not limited to, naturalization ceremonies, interviews, and, at a later day, initial biometric intakes.

Our phased approach to reopening is informed by industry best practices regarding:

- Social distancing and protective equipment;
- Sanitation; and
- Use and disinfection of common and high-traffic areas.

We are now going to hear from our Field Office Directorate.

## **Field Operations Directorate: Protecting Visitors to USCIS Facilities**

In accordance with health and safety guidelines, USCIS issued general guidelines for everyone – including employees – who comes to any USCIS facility. These apply to field offices which fall under my directorate but also to asylum offices and application support centers (ASCs) where biometrics are taken.

At USCIS offices, you will notice some changes to our parking lots, security, waiting rooms, and interview office set ups. To comply with CDC guidance, we have modified how people will wait in line for security. Each office may be slightly different in how they configure themselves to comply with the CDC guidance.

To protect the workforce and the public from exposure to COVID-19, we require all applicants, petitioners, requestors, visitors and employees over the age of two to wear face coverings while in a USCIS office until further notice.

Visitors may be directed to briefly remove their face covering to confirm their identity or take their photograph.

Visitors may not enter field offices, ASCs, and asylum offices more than 15 minutes before their appointment. Naturalization candidates may arrive 30 minutes before a naturalization ceremony.

Individuals should consult their appointment notice for the specific time to appear.

To limit the number of people in the waiting room, applicants, petitioners, and requestors with scheduled appointments may only be accompanied by:

- Attorneys or authorized representatives;
- Interpreters (in some cases, interpreters will be asked to be available by phone);
- Parents, legal guardians, or trusted adults, if the applicant, petitioner, or requestor being interviewed is a minor;
- Immediate family members listed as dependents on the application, petition, or request or interview notice; and
- An individual helping a person with disabilities.

USCIS is not accepting walk-in appointments. No members of the public will be admitted to a field office, asylum office, or ASC without an appointment at this time.

Individuals should bring their own black or blue ink pens to minimize contact.

There will be markings and physical barriers in the facility. All visitors should pay close attention to these signs to ensure they follow social distancing guidelines.

All applicants, petitioners, requestors, and visitors may be screened before they enter a USCIS facility. If they answer yes to any of the three screening questions, or if they refuse to wear a face covering in accordance with USCIS policy, they will not be allowed to enter a USCIS facility.

The screening questions are:

- Do you have any symptoms of COVID-19, including cough, fever, or difficulty breathing?
- In the past 14 days, have you been in close contact with anyone known or suspected to have COVID-19?
- In the past 14 days, has your health care provider or a public health authority instructed you to self-isolate or self-quarantine?

**If you are feeling sick, please do not come to the office.**

## **Field Operations Directorate: Interviews**

Since reopening our offices to the public and resuming in-person services on June 4, our top priority has been to schedule and conduct naturalization ceremonies for those whose ceremonies were postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Now that USCIS anticipates that we will conduct nearly all postponed naturalization ceremonies by the end of July, we will be resuming adjustment of status interviews, citizenship interviews and other in-person services in offices where necessary health and safety protocols are in place.

All USCIS field offices will reduce the number of interviews conducted per day to allow time for cleaning and reduce waiting room occupancy.

Applicants, petitioners, and requestors with previously scheduled appointments and interviews will receive a new appointment notice with information for when to appear.

Interviews may be conducted by video and with an officer in one room and the applicant in another room.

Visitors for the purposes of an interview are limited to the applicant, petitioner, or requestor, one representative and one individual providing disability assistance (who may be a family member).

How field offices are handling interpreters at interviews differs from asylum offices.

For those with interviews at a field office, those who do not speak English fluently should arrange to have an interpreter available by phone. **Do not bring an interpreter to the interview.**

My colleague will discuss the guidance specific to asylum interviews in a few minutes.

If an individual requires a sign language interpreter or certified deaf interpreter, they should reach out to the USCIS Contact Center at 800-375-5283 as soon as possible after receiving their interview notice.

An attorney or authorized representative may come with their client to the interview or be available by phone.

## **Field Operations Directorate: Other Appointments**

Those who had other appointments must reschedule through the USCIS [Contact Center](#) once field offices are open to the public.

Please check to see if the respective office has been reopened before calling the Contact Center. Visit the [USCIS Office Closings](#) webpage for the most up to date information.

Individuals may call the USCIS Contact Center at 800-375-5283 (TTY 800-767-1833) to reschedule.

## **Field Operations Directorate: Rescheduling**

Applicants, petitioners, and requestors should follow the instructions on their appointment notice to reschedule their appointment if any of these apply to them:

- Feeling ill (for any reason, not just related to COVID-19);

- Traveling or having contact with a person who tested positive for COVID-19 within the past two weeks; or
- Being at heightened risk due to age or an underlying health condition.

Those with underlying medical conditions who are at greater risk if exposed to COVID-19 may reschedule appointments at no penalty and should inform USCIS officials of their medical condition while rescheduling appointments.

These people should call the USCIS Contact Center at 800-375-5283 (TTY 800-767-1833) as soon as possible and/or follow the instructions on their interview notice.

There is no penalty for requesting to reschedule an appointment or naturalization ceremony.

## **Field Operations Directorate: Naturalization Ceremonies**

USCIS field offices will send notices to applicants and petitioners to reschedule postponed naturalization ceremonies.

The ceremonies will be shorter to limit exposure to those in attendance. Instead of playing videos during naturalization ceremonies, attendees will receive a flyer with information and links directing them to the videos on the [USCIS website](#).

At this time, we are not allowing guests at naturalization ceremonies. Ceremonies will be limited to the candidates who are scheduled to be naturalized and individuals who provide disability assistance for candidates.

We will now hear from my colleague Lee Bowes about what to expect with the reopening of our application support centers.

## **Application Support Centers**

As was mentioned by my colleague, all the same health and safety protocols will apply at our application support centers (ASCs), whether they are co-located with a USCIS field office or in stand-alone buildings.

ASC appointment notices will include specific instructions regarding safety protocols and requirements. Additionally, appointment notices will now include a worksheet to be filled out BEFORE arriving at the ASC appointment. The worksheet will be mailed with the appointment notice. The worksheet is used to facilitate the biometric collection process, and this new procedure will reduce the time and space needed in the ASC and limit the need to exchange and sanitize clipboards. The worksheet will be returned to the applicant at the end of biometric collection and does not need to be saved.

ASCs will have a phased reopening beginning July 13 and continuing throughout the month.

We will automatically reschedule ASC appointments that we canceled due to the temporary office closure. Individuals will receive a new appointment letter in the mail.

Applicants, petitioners, and requestors will only be processed on the day and time of their appointment, with exceptions for military members.

Applicants, petitioners, and requestors may only be accompanied by an interpreter, attorney/accredited representative, parent/legal guardian if the applicant, petitioner, or requestor is a minor, or individual providing disability assistance.

Biometrics will be captured with both the applicants and employee's safety in mind. Social distancing protocols will always be followed while within the ASC. The applicant will be requested to remove their face covering for a brief time in order to confirm identity and during the photo capture process.

We will now hear from Ted Kim about the Refugee, Asylum and International Operations (RAIO) reopening process.

## **Refugee, Asylum and International Operations**

As mentioned by my colleagues, the same general guidelines for health and safety will apply at our asylum offices that have reopened; however, there are a few distinctions that I'd like to highlight.

Let me first address the status of our international offices, and then I'll move to our asylum offices.

USCIS' international offices adhere to the Department of State's Chief of Mission guidelines at each post. Our international offices in Beijing and Guangzhou, China, and Nairobi, Kenya remain closed.

The USCIS offices in Rome, Accra and Santo Domingo are permanently closing on June 30 as part of the USCIS international footprint realignment and are no longer providing services to the public. Due to the pandemic, USCIS Rome has been closed to the public and Accra and Santo Domingo have only been providing emergency services since mid-March.

USCIS London will be permanently closing on July 31, and will continue to provide emergency services through June 19, its last day serving the public before its closure. Our other international offices in Mexico City, Guatemala City, San Salvador, and New Delhi continue to provide only emergency services to the public.

Domestically, all of our asylum offices are now open to the public with the exception of the Newark Asylum Office, which remains closed indefinitely due to facilities issues that make it unsafe to fully re-open during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Asylum offices are open to individuals appearing for previously scheduled interview appointments.

The asylum offices are automatically rescheduling asylum interviews that were cancelled during the temporary closures. When USCIS reschedules the interview, asylum applicants will receive a new interview notice with the new time, date and location for the interview and information about safety precautions.

In accordance with social distancing guidelines, and due to the length of asylum interviews, asylum offices are conducting video-facilitated asylum interviews, where the interview officer sits in one room, and the applicants and any attorney or interpreter all sit in separate rooms.

Asylum offices will use available technology, including mobile devices provided by USCIS, to ensure that the officer, applicant, interpreter and representative can fully and safely participate in the interview while maintaining social distancing.

For affirmative asylum interviews, applicants must bring all immediate family members listed as dependents on the application and an interpreter, if the applicant does not speak English. Additionally, a representative, witness, individual providing disability accommodations or “trusted adult” if an applicant is a minor, may attend the interview.

To clarify a difference between field office interviews, asylum applicants are currently required to bring an interpreter, in-person, to their asylum interview if they cannot do the interview in English. Phone participation by interpreters is not permitted for affirmative asylum interviews.

Those attending appointments at an asylum office should follow the Guidelines for Entering USCIS Facilities as described before and can also be found on [uscis.gov](https://uscis.gov).

You may request to reschedule your appointment due to illness or risk of COVID-19 infection, and the delay will not be attributed to you.

If you need to make an inquiry regarding your asylum case, please contact the asylum offices by email, mail, or phone, as we are not accepting walk-in inquiries. Contact information for each asylum office is found using the [Asylum Office Locator](#) on the USCIS website. If you have an asylum application pending with us, you can check your case status online. You will need the receipt number that we mailed you after you filed your application.

Additionally, until further notice, all affirmative asylum decisions will be mailed out to applicants and representatives at the address of record. Applicants do not have to return to the office to pick up the decision in their case.

I will now pass back to my colleague Carlos from Public Engagement.

## **Online Filing**

Thank you to all our presenters. Before we move to the question and answer portion, I'd like to emphasize the importance of our agency online tools.

As always, applicants should continue to take advantage of online filing options and use online self-help tools.

To get started, create a free USCIS online account at [myaccount.uscis.gov](https://myaccount.uscis.gov).

By filing online, you can get helpful step-by-step instructions as you complete your form. It'll feel as though we are right there with you. By filing online, you will only need to answer the questions that apply to you, avoid common mistakes such as forgetting to sign your application, upload supporting documents related to your case, and securely pay your fee online.

After you file online, the system will confirm that USCIS has received your application, so you can rest easy while we work on your application.

After you file, you can also use your account to track the status of your case, upload any additional evidence we may need from you, send us a secure message, and access every notice we send you all in one place.

USCIS also offers a variety of online self-help tools at [uscis.gov/tools](https://uscis.gov/tools). For instance, we provide a convenient way for you to change your address online, check case processing times, and find educational resources such as citizenship study materials.

The USCIS Contact Center is in the process of implementing a new, speech-enabled Interactive Voice Response system, or IVR.

The new IVR will greatly improve callers' ability to get information through the phone. Using natural language processing, you can simply state your question or the information you need rather than going through a series of prompts.

A caller can receive text or email links to information like forms, processing times, and how to change address.

The USCIS Contact Center officially deployed the new IVR last month and is gradually increasing the percentage over the next several weeks. We anticipate the new IVR will be fully implemented by early August.

## **Question and Answer Session**

We will now take your questions submitted through the Public Engagement mailbox, both received in advance and during this engagement.

**We ask that you please limit your questions to today's topic.**

**We also remind you that we are not able to address any case-specific questions or comments during this session.**

## **Closing Remarks**

Thank you everyone for participating in today's engagement.

We invite everyone to visit our website at [uscis.gov](https://uscis.gov) to get additional information about our agency and its operations.

We are posting the latest COVID-19 related information at [uscis.gov/coronavirus](https://uscis.gov/coronavirus).

You can find information on visiting USCIS facilities at [uscis.gov/visitorpolicy](https://uscis.gov/visitorpolicy).

Should you have any feedback regarding today's engagement or questions, please email us at [public.engagement@uscis.dhs.gov](mailto:public.engagement@uscis.dhs.gov).

Again, thank you for joining us, and please enjoy the remainder of your day.