

National Security

U.S. Immigration agency to more closely monitor caseworkers, documents show

By Nick Miroff

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The federal agency that runs the U.S. immigration system is creating an internal division to more rigorously police its own caseworkers, a move possibly aimed at those who may be too lenient with applicants seeking residency or citizenship, according to staffers and internal documents obtained by The Washington Post.

Plans for the new oversight division have not been widely disclosed to the 19,000 employees and contractors of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), but the agency has been quietly reassigning personnel to staff it, according to people with knowledge of the plans who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the preparations.

USCIS and its director, L. Francis Cissna, have been at the center of the Trump administration's efforts to slash legal immigration and scrap the family-reunification model — what the White House calls “[chain migration](#)” — that has been the foundation of the U.S. immigration system for more than 50 years.

According to the documents, USCIS will establish the Organization of Professional Responsibility to enhance oversight of the way its employees handle the more than 26,000 cases the agency adjudicates [daily](#). The office will have three divisions, including an Investigations Division to “manage the agency’s program that investigates cases involving fraud, waste, abuse or misconduct by USCIS employees,” according to one draft version obtained by The Post.

A USCIS official with knowledge of the plans said it has been viewed internally as a crackdown on employees who may be too forgiving toward applicants for permanent legal residence or citizenship and who may have demerits in their case files, including misdemeanor criminal charges or having received public assistance such as welfare payments.

USCIS officials confirmed that the agency has developed plans for the internal oversight office but said a final decision had not been made.

“USCIS is not creating an oversight division to monitor employees perceived as too lenient with adjudicating immigration benefit requests,” said USCIS spokesman Jonathan Withington in a statement, calling claims to the contrary “absolutely false.”

“The role of an Office of Professional Responsibility — something which many federal agencies have — is to investigate waste, fraud and abuse, ensure the agency is not vulnerable to exploitation by criminal or foreign elements, and confirm proper audits are in place,” he added.

“No final decisions have been made whether to create an Office of Professional Responsibility, nor have any staff reassignments occurred. Such considerations are pre-decisional until they are formally announced.”

A 2016 [report](#) by the Department of Homeland Security’s Inspector General urged a USCIS reorganization that would place the agency’s Investigative Division directly beneath top leadership. The report found that public complaints about USCIS employee conduct had fallen significantly, from 1,240 in 2013 to 619 in 2015.

According to the documents, the new oversight office also will have a Counterintelligence Division to reduce vulnerability to penetration by foreign governments and criminals, as well as an inspections division to “conduct independent reviews of specific aspects of agency compliance.”

The oversight office will be led by Sarah Kendall, a top USCIS official for fraud detection and national security. Kendall will report directly to Cissna and deputy director James W. McCament, according to the documents.

Cissna has repeatedly told employees he wants to increase professionalism and integrity at USCIS by implementing better management practices. In statements to staffers, he has urged greater transparency and a strict fealty to the law.

But Cissna also has become a target of critics of the Trump administration’s immigration agenda. He triggered a backlash last month for removing [language](#) from the agency’s mission statement that described its focus as securing “America’s promise as a nation of immigrants.”

Cissna also moved to eliminate references to those seeking immigration benefits as “customers” in favor of the more neutral “applicants,” telling staffers that their primary responsibility was not to satisfy those seeking benefits but to uphold the law and protect U.S. national security.

“U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services administers the nation’s lawful immigration system, safeguarding its integrity and promise by efficiently and fairly adjudicating requests for immigration benefits while protecting Americans, securing the homeland, and honoring our values,” read the new statement, which Cissna [said](#) he personally formulated.

According to the documents obtained by The Post, the new internal oversight office “will allow USCIS to more efficiently and effectively focus on integrity management.”

“Under Director Cissna’s guidance and vision, we will continue to identify organizational efficiencies to best achieve our agency’s critical mission,” the documents say.

A draft statement to the agency’s employees urges them to report any “known or suspected” misconduct “without delay” to the new oversight office, their supervisors or the Inspector General of the Department of Homeland Security.

Nick Miroff

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Nick Miroff covers immigration enforcement, drug trafficking and the Department of Homeland Security on The Washington Post's National Security desk. He was a Post foreign correspondent in Latin America from 2010 to 2017, and has been a staff writer since 2006. Follow 

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