

March 21, 2007

Director, Regulatory Management Division
United States Citizenship and Immigration Services
Department of Homeland Security
111 Massachusetts Ave., NW 3rd Floor
Washington, D.C. 20529

RE: DHS Docket No. USCIS 2006-0044

Dear Director of Regulatory Management:

I write in strong opposition to the proposal by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to increase the fees for starting the naturalization process. Under the USCIS' proposal, the fee for filing the Form N-400 would increase from \$330 to \$595, and the biometrics fee would increase from \$70 to \$80, resulting in a total increase from \$400 to \$675. The proposed 69% fee hike is an unfair burden for hardworking newcomers who wish to become U.S. citizens and participate in everything that this nation has to offer.

Currently, many newcomer families have limited resources, and they work tirelessly to save up the money required to pay the current \$400 naturalization application cost. According to data from the U.S. Census, about one-third (36%) of non-citizen households have annual incomes that are less than \$25,000. Family members often want to pursue U.S. citizenship by applying for naturalization at the same time. With the increase proposed by the USCIS, a family of four would confront a bill amounting to \$2,700. An exorbitant price tag should not stand in the way of families seeking to realize the American Dream.

I do not oppose applicants paying a fee to apply for U.S. citizenship and commend the USCIS for taking the steps to improve customer services and processing times. I also understand that the agency believes it needs to raise fees to pay for major infrastructure investments and process enhancements, such as improvements in the timeliness of background checks, modernization of its outdated business systems, facilities improvements and enhancements in its personnel training and recruitment programs. However, placing the full costs of these investments on the back of our nation's legal permanent residents is driving fees to a level that immigrants simply cannot afford.

I urge the USCIS to work with the President and Congress to obtain appropriations to supplement fee revenue to cover costs of major USCIS expenses such as infrastructure investments, process enhancements and capital improvements. In the past, Congress has appropriated monies to assist the USCIS in facing challenges such as its application processing backlog. The USCIS believes it needs to make significant investments to build an Immigration Service for the 21st Century. This is precisely the type of challenge that should be met through the partnership between applicants paying a reasonable fee and the appropriation of Congressional funding.

Immigrants who apply for U.S. citizenship are eager to demonstrate their commitment to this country by becoming full participants in our nation's civic life. If they cannot become U.S. citizens because of an unfair fee hike, we will all lose an opportunity to strengthen and revitalize our democracy. Our nation has a tradition of welcoming newcomers because of their contributions to our economic and social progress. The USCIS' proposed fee increase is contrary to the spirit of this tradition and sends newcomers the wrong message at a time when they are seeking to embrace U.S. citizenship. I urge you to halt the proposed naturalization fee increase, and seek appropriated funding to help cover the investments the USCIS needs to provide quality services at an affordable price.

Thank you for your consideration of my views.

Sincerely,

Maria Mercado
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