

IMMIG PAPERWORK'S ONLINE AT LAST BY FALL

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Body

A HEAVILY touted plan to computerize immigration files and get rid of a paper-pushing system is expected to begin in the fall - behind schedule and over its original budget.

"We are not on the timetable that was originally devised," U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Director Alejandro Mayorkas acknowledged yesterday.

The agency has pushed the schedule back and the budget up three times, online records show. It already has spent \$631.1 million on the project - and is expected to eventually hit \$2.4 billion.

Modernizing the process can't come soon enough for immigrants who line up dozens deep in front of the lower Manhattan immigration building each morning.

"It takes time. Years!" said 19-year-old Dane, who left Guyana for Brooklyn.

He was hoping for a resolution this week on a petition his aunt filed to make his mom and him permanent residents.

The latest schedule for the Internet project, dubbed Transformation, calls for getting everything online and running by 2016. The total planned budget includes operational costs through 2022.

This fall, if all goes as planned, immigrants filing for work permits, visa extensions and other common applications will be able to set up online accounts and file electronically.

Much of the delay was caused by a back-and-forth over which applications should go online first, Mayorkas said.

The agency expected to start with citizenship applications, but Mayorkas decided in 2009 to start with the applications immigrants file at the beginning of the process.

Meanwhile, even if the new online system gets up and running by the new deadline, immigration lawyers say the agency will still have a long way to go.

"Just getting it all online isn't going to fix it," said Laura Lichter of the American Immigration Lawyers Association.

"It'll be supercool, but to be able to find out quickly that your application is stuck doesn't change the fact that it's stuck and maybe is not being handled correctly."

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