

A Long Wait On the Doorstep;

At Immigration Offices, Amid Lines and Lost Time, An Old Hope Survives

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Body

This is where the American dream can seem both closer than ever and impossibly out of reach -- in the endless, exhausting **lines** that form every day before dawn outside the doors of **immigration offices**.

It is where Esteban Travieso, an immigrant from Uruguay, **waited** for five and a half hours last week, in **line** at the **immigration office** in lower Manhattan to ask how he could replace his **lost** residency card. Where Geordany Josselin, 21, a Haitian, **waited** for more than six hours to find out what had happened to his residency application. And where Dora Binti-milla **waited** for four hours to see how she could bring her daughter from Ecuador so they can be together again after 13 years.

"I have put off coming down here for as much as I could -- wouldn't you?" said Mr. Travieso, 27, a truck driver who lives in Queens, pointing to the **line** stretching behind him. "Everybody here wants the same thing, peace of mind. But to get it, you have to go through hell and back. And, of course, the **line**."

Despite recent efforts by the Federal **Immigration** and Naturalization Service to cut down on the need to **wait** in **line** for routine services and queries, the **waiting** persists, not only in New York but also in Newark, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami and other cities with large immigrant populations.

The busiest **offices**, like the one in lower Manhattan, see an average of 1,000 people a day, and an average **wait** can be as much as three hours or more. When it is finally their turn, they often encounter surly, uninterested or overburdened workers, who hand them yet another form and tell them to stand in yet another **line**, or to return another day.

While frustrating encounters with bureaucracy are not a complaint unique to immigrants -- as anyone who has visited a motor vehicles **office** can attest -- the burden can be particularly heavy for newcomers. They often have unstable jobs with no vacation **time** and little flexibility, so taking **time** off is a hardship. And many immigrants with little education and no English find themselves baffled by the complexity of **immigration** rules that can determine their future.

Recent changes in **immigration** laws, which seem to create new deadlines every few months, can make the **lines** even **longer**, as misinformed and desperate immigrants flock to **offices** seeking help.

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Ibrahim, 24, a native of Somalia who did not want to reveal his last name, woke up at 4 A.M. on March 30 and rushed to the immigration office in Newark. Another immigrant at the construction site where he works had alerted him to a new deadline for applicants for political asylum. Under a 1996 law, all immigrants who arrived in the United States before April 1, 1997, had until April 1, 1998, to file claims for asylum.

At the same time, and on the same day, another deadline sent another category of immigrants scrambling for help. Under the new law, people who have been in the country illegally for more than a year were required to return to their home countries before April 1 to avoid being barred from re-entering the United States legally for 10 years.

Ibrahim, who left his country in 1996 and now lives in Rahway, N.J., said immigration officials would grant him asylum right away, without forcing him to stand in line or submit to an interview, if only they could see his scars.

"Look at this," he said, lifting his shirt in front of the crowd of onlookers to expose jagged scars inflicted in Somalia and running across his chest. "Is this enough to let me live in America, you think?"

As it turned out, he was in the wrong line. After a two-hour wait, an officer told him that asylum applicants need not show up in person. They must file by mail. Ibrahim left as bewildered as when he arrived.

"I don't know what happens to me now," he said, shrugging off the idea of hiring a lawyer. "I have lived long enough here without one. Maybe I don't need help."

Even without the urgency of an approaching deadline, the lines in front of immigration offices are fed every day by thousands of people puzzled by mind-numbing immigration regulations and motivated by an intense desire to become Americans.

"In the harshest day of winter, there is a line," Alan Atkinson, a spokesman at the local immigration office in New York, said last week. "In the hottest day of the summer, there is a line. In the prettiest day of spring, there is a line. It just never changes."

The lower Manhattan office is the only one for general immigration cases in New York City. In 19 working days in February, it served 10,000 people who walked in with inquiries and 11,500 who came in to file applications for various benefits, Mr. Atkinson said. Rob Koon, a spokesman with the Immigration and Naturalization Service in Washington, said last week that from October of last year until the end of February, at least 2.2 million people went to 79 immigration offices asking for help.

No matter how long the lines seem, though, immigrants agree that the situation is actually better than it was a few years ago.

In New York, people now wait their turn inside a portable structure that protects them from the rain or cold. In Newark, officers regularly canvass the lines trying to spot people who are misinformed and waiting in vain. And in Miami, people are now guaranteed service if they are in line before noon, whereas before, they could wait for hours only to be told at the end of the day that the office was closed.

In addition, the Immigration and Naturalization Service has come up with a range of services -- from a web site to satellite offices dedicated to citizenship applications only -- to reduce the volume of work at the district offices and, therefore, the waiting time.

Eric Andrus, a spokesman for the agency in Washington, said it now has an automated toll-free number for information and another to request forms. A new line, on which callers can speak to a person, was recently installed, but only for the East Coast; it will be available nationwide in the summer, he said. Citizenship forms are available on the Internet.

"We are not where we want to be yet, but we are trying to make the process more convenient for all," Mr. Andrus said.

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In addition, immigration officials recently presented Congress a proposal to separate the enforcement division from the agency's customer service operation. "We could then retrain our officers and offer better service, something advocates for immigrants have been asking us to do for a long time," Mr. Andrus said.

Despite the changes, immigrants and their relatives continue to stand in line because, in many cases, they have no choice. Often, they are poor and illiterate in English and have no access to a computer. Many cannot afford a lawyer but are stymied by long, detailed forms. When they call the information lines, the wait is long and the maze of alternatives so confusing and impersonal that many people prefer to stand in line. They view the line as a necessary evil, one more step in the tangled and expensive process of trying to settle, legally, in the United States.

"You don't call," said Angie Zapitero, 27, who was standing in line in Houston to renew her Mexican husband's work permit. "It's better just to come down here and talk to them. It's faster. You'll be put on hold for hours if you call."

Ivo Dimov, 33, a Bulgarian immigrant, waited outside the immigration offices in Los Angeles with his wife, Tanya, to get a special travel permit for a visit home. Since they arrived six years ago, they have lost an uncle, an aunt, a grandmother and a grandfather, and they want to go back to pay their last respects.

After two hours, they moved inside the building where, after another short line, they were assigned a number and told to wait some more. With about 50 people ahead of them, they were sitting quietly when a woman's shriek from a window caught everybody's attention. "Don't you have any decency here? You treat people like cattle."

The Dimovs appeared resigned. "It's a whole wasted day," he said. "I don't even know if I will get what we're here for."

The answers that wait at the end of the long lines can shape the course of a whole life. They can determine whether an immigrant becomes a legal resident or stays underground, learns English or remains illiterate, receives welfare benefits or peddles trinkets in the streets, travels home to see his family or spends his salary on weekly phone calls.

Mr. Josselin, who came to New York from Haiti in 1989, was the first in line on March 30 at the New York immigration office, arriving at 3 A.M. so he would not have to miss much time at work. He hopes to study engineering but needs financial aid, and to get it he has to become a permanent resident. After he applied for a green card, he received a letter advising him that one of his forms was missing.

The immigration officer who dealt with him when his number was called at 7:50 A.M. did not know that Mr. Josselin felt his future was at stake. The officer took her time, unwrapping a piece of gum and carefully placing it in her mouth before she turned to him, without a greeting. Mr. Josselin showed her the letter. She punched his name into her computer and told him she thought his case had been closed and that he needed to reapply.

Mr. Josselin seemed numb throughout the process. He simply moved from line to line, floor to floor, officer to officer and did as he was told, asking few questions. He stood in line again to get some forms for a friend. At 9:15 A.M., six hours and 15 minutes after he started the line, he walked out of the building.

"I have been through this line before," he said. "And I'll do it again if I have to."

Getting Answers

To get Immigration and Naturalization Service help:

Recorded message: 800-755-0777 (everywhere except East Coast)

Recorded message and live person: 800-375-5283 (East Coast only; nationwide beginning this summer)

To order forms: 800-870-3676

Web site: www.ins.usdoj.gov

Graphic

Photos: At the Newark immigration office, which opens at 7:30 A.M., the waiting lines can start forming in the middle of the night. They come wanting to replace a lost residency card, to check on residency applications, to bring a long-lost daughter to this country, to apply for political asylum. (Photographs by John Sotomayor/The New York Times)

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