

## **HELP'S IN LINE FOR IMMIGRANTS**

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### **Body**

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**Immigrants** will tell you that dealing with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) - one of three former Immigration and Naturalization Service components that joined the U.S. Department of Homeland Security on March 1, 2003 - is even more unpleasant than a visit to the dentist.

If you walk by its New York offices Monday to Friday, you will see long lines of people waiting to speak to immigration officers about their cases. Rain or shine, freezing weather or unbearable heat, most of them get there before dawn. And many will be turned away at the end of the day.

Yet in these rough times of flash deportations, immigration backlogs, the Patriot Act and undisguised hostility toward **immigrants**, there is finally a new USCIS program that does something good for them.

Its name is InfoPass, and it is a new system that allows people to set up **immigrant** appointments online. It holds the almost unbelievable promise of making the seemingly eternal lines disappear - and making life easier for **immigrants**. It was implemented last year in Florida and in the Los Angeles area on March 17. The results have been encouraging.

"This is another important stride in our commitment to bring USCIS customer service into the 21st century," an obviously proud USCIS Director Eduardo Aguirre said. "InfoPass debuted last year in Miami, where we faced challenges similar to those in Los Angeles. In a matter of weeks, we saw a dramatic decrease in the lines and wait times for our clients, and we're optimistic we'll have similar results here."

For **immigrants** in the New York area, InfoPass would definitely be an improvement.

"It is a quality-of-life issue for **immigrants**, and it is important," said Allan Wernick, a New York immigration lawyer and Daily News columnist. "And it shows that there is someone in government thinking about what can be done to make things work."

New York is the quintessential **immigrant** city. However, immigration services here hold the dubious distinction of being among the country's worst. And even though Aguirre told a group of business people in Miami last month that New York was among the cities where he wants to implement InfoPass, he did not say when. We say the sooner the better.

For one thing, the new system is pretty easy to use. Customers log on to the InfoPass Web site at [uscis.gov](http://uscis.gov). After typing in their zip code, they are directed to the appropriate USCIS office. The Web site then displays a range of dates and times for appointments. Once the customer selects an appointment time, the system generates an electronic appointment notice. The customer must print out that notice and bring it with them to their appointment.

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To address the legitimate concern that many immigrants do not have access to the Internet, the USCIS has an answer. Those without Internet access can make appointments using touch-screen InfoPass kiosks at any participating USCIS office. Most public libraries and many community-based organizations, they add, also offer public Internet access.

"It is a good program," Wernick said.

But InfoPass does not go to the heart of one of the most troubling problems at the USCIS: the long backlog of applications for citizenship and permanent residency.

That backlog has a devastating impact on the lives of immigrants, who are condemned to years of senseless separation from their loved ones, and makes it impossible for them to earn a living by working their fingers to the bone - which is what they came to this country for.

"And [the backlog] deprives immigrants of very fundamental rights, such as voting and fully participating in American democracy," Wernick said.

Obviously, much more than InfoPass is needed. Still, the new system is a positive step that, for a change, does good things for immigrants. Let's hope it comes to New York [ASAP.Aruiz@edit.nydailynews.com](mailto:ASAP.Aruiz@edit.nydailynews.com)

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