Immigration Agency Hires Accountants for Full Review

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Body

In a sign of just how broken the nation's citizenship process is, the Justice Department awarded a $4.3 million contract today to one of the nation's largest accounting firms to overhaul the entire process, from testing immigrants' knowledge of English to computerizing thousands of paper files.

The Justice Department selected Coopers & Lybrand for the job, which officials expect to take two years. The contract is one of the largest the department has ever awarded for consulting.

The firm faces a daunting task. More than 180,000 immigrants, including some convicted felons, became citizens last year without complete background checks. Republicans have accused the Clinton Administration of having rushed applicants through the process in time to vote in November.

And the backlog in processing citizenship applications has grown so large that many immigrants will most likely lose their welfare benefits because they will not be able to be naturalized before the deadline in August.

"The system is much in need of repair," Attorney General Janet Reno told reporters. "What this contract reflects is our determination to make sure that it is done in the most comprehensive manner possible."

The basic problem for the ***Immigration*** and Naturalization Service is that its outdated citizenship machinery is hopelessly ill equipped to deal with the flood of applicants.

The number of applicants for citizenship increased, to 1.3 million in the 1996 fiscal year from 300,000 in the 1993 fiscal year. ***Immigration*** officials say they expect 1.8 million applications this year.

With backlogs reaching two to four years in some cities, the ***immigration agency*** began a program called Citizenship U.S.A. in August 1995 that aimed at reducing the waiting time to become a citizen to six months. The ***immigration*** service ***hired*** 900 temporary workers, reduced some of the paperwork and asked community groups to help immigrants fill out applications.

But in the rush to meet its deadline, the integrity of the process may have been compromised, a Justice Department analysis has concluded.

"As the volume of cases handled continued to expand rapidly, the effort became driven more by the need to reduce the number of backlog cases rather than a comprehensive streamlining strategy," according to a document the Justice Department gave to companies interested in bidding on the consulting contract.

The nine-page document, called a statement of work, outlines the history of the problem and the contract's requirements. The document was prepared by officials of the Justice Department and its ***immigration*** service, and it was approved by Stephen R. Colgate, Assistant Attorney General for Administration. Mr. Colgate will oversee the redesign.

Congressional Republicans expressed skepticism that the consultants could correct the problems.

"The award of this contract looks like a signed confession that the naturalization process is in disarray," said Lamar Smith, Republican of Texas and head of the House Subcommittee on ***Immigration***.

Harold Rogers, Republican of Kentucky and head of the House Appropriations subcommittee that controls the ***immigration*** service's finances, said: "It's a sad commentary on the management of the I.N.S. that we have to pay millions of dollars to an outside consulting firm, because I.N.S. has been incapable of making long overdue fixes to the naturalization process."

Independent experts also voiced caution. "I'd certainly applaud anything that could help the naturalization process become more efficient and more timely," said Jeanne A. Butterfield, executive director of the American ***Immigration*** Lawyers Association. "But I'm suspicious of another study, because a large part of what would cure the naturalization problem would be additional resources for timely fingerprint checks and I.N.S. interviews."

Consultants from Coopers & Lybrand, which beat out five rivals for the contract, will ***review*** many aspects of the program, including technology, offices, organization and culture, as well as coordination with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The consultants will have until Sept. 30 to draft a plan. The changes are scheduled to be carried out through the end of next year, and the team would monitor the changes until March 1, 1999.

A partner at Coopers & Lybrand who is leading the team, Stan Hawthorne, said the firm had worked on other ***immigration*** projects for the service for at least two years.

The ***agency*** is trying to correct some flaws. In one change immigrants will now be naturalized only after the F.B.I. checks their fingerprints for past arrests.

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