

VALLEY TO INS: TIME FOR AN UPGRADE HIGH-TECH ADVICE ABOUNDS AT HEARING ON AGENCY'S TROUBLES

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Body

High technology -- a Web-based data system and new software programs that manage and track cases -- could help the **INS** provide better service **in** Northern California, advocates and Silicon **Valley high-tech** executives said Friday during a congressional **hearing in** San Jose.

Although the **agency** is installing new computers, keeping electronic files of fingerprints and adding workers, the changes are at least a year or two away for the problem-plagued Immigration and Naturalization Service offices **in** San Jose and San Francisco.

That's disappointing news to thousands of immigrants **in** Santa Clara County and elsewhere **in** Northern California -- some of whom were among about 200 attending Friday's **hearing**. Among those affected:

* Linus Torvalds, the Linux operating system founder who can't get a driver's license because he doesn't have a green card.

* Jacob Bromley, an ex-British soldier who wants citizenship for his wife, Yetta, his long-lost wartime sweetheart.

* Major Silicon **Valley** industries losing millions **in** relocation costs because of **INS** delays **in** processing green cards for workers on temporary visas.

An exasperated Rep. Zoe Lofgren, D-San Jose, who led the half-day congressional **hearing** on improving services at local **INS** offices, wondered aloud why the **agency** seems so far behind the **times**:

"**In** an era when FedEx can tell you online precisely where your package is, why can't the **INS** office tell you anything about the status of an application pending with **INS** for years?" she asked. "**In** an era when you can secure a home loan and obligate yourself on the World Wide Web for hundreds of thousands of dollars without standing **in** line, why is it that the best you can do at an **INS** Web site is to download some form so you can fill it out by hand, stand **in** line **in** the rain and wait half a decade for an answer?"

Immigrants waiting to become naturalized citizens and **high-tech** workers with H-1B visas waiting for green cards have been complaining for years about lost files, rude and abusive treatment, lost fingerprints, standing hours **in** line and waiting years to **hear** about their cases from the **INS** offices **in** San Jose and San Francisco.

Wide-ranging complaints

Immigrants and advocates recounted litanies of **INS** problems during Friday's **hearing**.

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George Windsor Jones of San Jose told the panel how he waited for nearly two years to hear about the status of his wife's application for permanent residency.

A few days ago, he received an INS notice referring him to a telephone number that's no longer in service.

John Barey of Alameda County, a political refugee from Afghanistan, told the panel how his father, brother and another relative were killed under the Taliban regime in the past two years while waiting for the INS to issue permission for them to immigrate to the United States.

"I suspect most of the INS problems stem from bureaucracy," said Torvalds, the Finnish creator of Linux. "They shuffle paper all the time. It's obvious the INS will never provide good service as long as it's pushing paper around."

Torvalds and other high-technology company executives told the panel that some of the more immediate problems at the INS could be easily fixed by technology that is readily available.

For instance, a Web-based data system is available at TekEdge in Santa Clara to H-1B workers who want to find out about the status of their cases, said Sunil Vatave, general counsel for the company.

A similar in-house system is available to clients of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, said Warren Leiden, a member of the Washington, D.C.-based group.

"What can we do to help the INS get into the 21st century?" Lofgren asked.

Answers are well within reach, said Sunil, who added that it "took us all of two weeks" to get the TekEdge Web-based system running.

The INS offices in San Francisco and San Jose have a combined backlog of almost 100,000 so-called "status adjudication" cases -- work visas waiting conversion to green cards, and permanent residents waiting to become citizens.

Lofgren and other congressional delegates slammed the INS on Friday for failing to fix the problems, even after many meetings. Rep. Lynn Woolsey, D-Santa Rosa, called the INS "the agency from hell," drawing snickers and laughter from the audience.

Problems recognized

William Yates, INS deputy executive associate commissioner, acknowledged the problems and blamed them on a number of factors: the delay in the 2000 fiscal budget; shifting the agency's focus from citizenship to so-called "status adjustment," or processing of green cards; and more delays caused by the change to electronic fingerprinting.

"You've told us we have to be more efficient and we realize that," Yates said.

Lofgren and the other members of Congress told Yates the inefficiencies at his agency have caused hardships for people, many of them, like Torvalds, key players in Silicon Valley's high-tech industry.

One Intel Corp. engineer will soon have to return to Malaysia because his H-1B visa is expiring while INS is processing his green card. It's not only a hardship for him and his family: Intel will spend \$200,000 to relocate him abroad for three months, said Deb Kessler, immigration specialist for Intel.

At Sun Microsystems in San Jose, 10 workers on temporary work visas will lose their jobs because the INS didn't process their green cards quickly enough, and this year about 100 more face the same prospect, said Heidi Wilson, the company's corporate immigrant manager.

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Sun has an office in Bangalore, India, which complicates things for many workers with pending green cards who are unable to travel for business, Wilson said.

"When you're talking about the head engineer of having to leave for three months, in high technology, that's s an eternity," said Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco.

Graphic

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PHOTO: EUGENE H. LOUIE -- MERCURY NEWS

Yetta Bromley's husband, Jacob Bromley, told of the British couple's INS woes.

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PHOTO: EUGENE H. LOUIE -- MERCURY NEWS

Linux creator Linus Torvalds of Finland discusses INS problems with Rep. Zoe Lofgren after Friday's hearing in San Jose.

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