

Restoring integrity Our view • St. Louis immigration office complaints warrant investigation.

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Body

The U.S. Citizenship and **Immigration** Services proclaims its core values to be **integrity**, respect, ingenuity and vigilance. It pledges that employees will treat everyone "with dignity and courtesy."

But a **complaint** hand-delivered last month to agency director Alejandro Mayorkas strongly suggests that the **St. Louis** field **office** of USCIS not only fails to honor those values, but actually betrays them in many cases. Often at risk are vulnerable people with extremely limited financial and social resources.

If the letter and its accompanying documentation - first reported by the Post-Dispatch's Phillip **O'Connor** - are even close to representative of conditions here, the **St. Louis office** needs a major housecleaning, comprehensive retraining and much tighter oversight.

The **St. Louis office** deals with legal immigrants living in the United States and U.S. citizens on compliance with rules governing everything from family, marriage and international adoption issues to education and employment visas, sanctuary from persecution overseas and applications for naturalized citizenship.

According to the **complaint** letter, some staff members at the **St. Louis office** - not all - subject far too many of these people to abusive, intrusive, insulting and grossly unprofessional treatment. The letter cites dozens of examples from 2011 alone, compiled from a survey of some 170 members of the Missouri/Kansas chapter of the American **Immigration** Lawyers Association. Among the allegations:

Some district adjudicating officers make disparaging comments about people's religions. Others insult their parenting practices and probe into their sexual activities. Some officers yell and throw things during interviews and threaten to reject people's applications if they continue to bring their lawyers with them, as they are entitled to do.

Processing delays are common, putting lives on hold for three, five and even seven years. Lawyers, many of whom work at reduced rates or without charge through non-profit organizations, are told to not speak or ask questions on behalf of their clients, and written inquiries routinely are ignored.

"USCIS is reviewing this matter and takes these allegations with the utmost seriousness," said USCIS press secretary Chris Bentley in a statement. "Our agency is committed to protecting the rights and liberties of all individuals who come before us."

Robert Deasy, director of liaison and information for the American **Immigration** Lawyers Association, parent group of the Missouri/Kansas chapter, said his group is confident that "the agency is giving this an appropriate level of review. Fortunately, we don't often see the kinds of things that have been reported out of the **St. Louis office**."

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As it happens, Mr. Mayorkas soon will have a resource available to him at USCIS who could prove invaluable: Stephen Legomsky, a professor at Washington University's School of Law and nationally renowned authority on immigration law and policy. Earlier this month, the university announced that he would take a leave of absence from his academic duties to become chief counsel at USCIS in Washington, D.C.

Reached at his St. Louis home last week, Mr. Legomsky told us that he was aware of the complaint about the St. Louis office but, as the agency's incoming chief legal officer, it would be inappropriate for him to discuss it.

Area immigration lawyers describe Mr. Legomsky as a no-nonsense professional with deep knowledge of the complexities of immigration, citizenship and refugee law. Mr. Mayorkas could hardly find anyone better to get to the bottom of the outrageous St. Louis situation.

Mr. Legomsky reports for work tomorrow.

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