

U.S. Immigration Agents Fell Short of Probe Goal

The Washington Post

December 15, 2007 Saturday, Suburban Edition

Copyright 2007 The Washington Post All Rights Reserved



Distribution: Maryland

Section: A-SECTION; Pg. A02

Length: 473 words

Byline: Spencer S. Hsu

Washington Post Staff Writer

Body

U.S. immigration agents investigated only 139 suspected fraud cases referred by the main anti-fraud unit of **U.S.** Citizenship and **Immigration** Services last year, or less than 1 percent of 1 percent of about 6 million applications for citizenship, green cards and other benefits, federal investigators reported yesterday.

The Department of Homeland Security's inspector general, Richard L. Skinner, blamed a DHS policy set in February 2006 requiring that 100 percent of suspect applications be investigated, saying it overwhelmed claims officers and **immigration** investigators with work, rendering the policy all but useless.

"The current USCIS strategy for addressing **immigration** benefit fraud yields little measurable return," Skinner's office reported. Instead, **agents** diverted resources to higher priority national security and criminal background checks. DHS officials want to change the blanket policy but have not decided how, Skinner said.

Agency spokesman Christopher Bentley said that "USCIS remains committed" to improving anti-fraud efforts along with its sister investigative agency, **U.S. Immigration** and Customs Enforcement. "Neither ICE nor USCIS can help the fact the volume of potential fraud cases significantly exceeds the capability of both agencies," USCIS Director Emilio T. Gonzalez wrote Skinner in a formal response.

The inspector general's report, dated Oct. 29 and released yesterday, underscores problems dating to the March 2003 launch of DHS, which reorganized **U.S. immigration** agencies and expanded their duties. The report also highlights one of myriad hurdles to tougher **U.S. immigration** enforcement, a subject of heated national debate since Congress failed to pass a comprehensive overhaul of **immigration** laws this summer.

USCIS's 315-member Fraud Detection and National Security office was created in May 2004 with the **goal** of tracking all applications with any sign of fraud. But in practice, not all 3,500 USCIS claim adjudicators turn in such forms, because doing so counts against their productivity.

U.S. Immigration Agents Fell Short of Probe Goal

FDNS referred less than 1 percent of applications to ICE for investigation in fiscal 2006, about 2,425 cases. ICE investigated less than 1 percent of them, or 139 cases, the inspector general reported. By comparison, in 2004 ICE conducted 53,376 investigations -- of which 5,351 were benefit fraud-related -- leading to 533 convictions.

Immigration officials say without massive new resources, they have to set priorities. ICE mostly targets conspiracies, fraud rings, security and safety risks, the report said. USCIS wants to target cases involving lawyers, third-party preparers and individuals from countries designated as posing terrorism risks.

The report noted other complaints with FDNS systems, which early this year had a backlog of more than 15,000 fraud referrals and security-related checks.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: **IMMIGRATION** (92%); CITIZENSHIP (90%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (90%); INVESTIGATIONS (90%); SPECIAL INVESTIGATIVE FORCES (90%); NATIONAL SECURITY (89%); **IMMIGRATION** LAW (89%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (78%); BACKGROUND CHECKS (78%); CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIONS (78%); CITIZENSHIP LAW (78%); CONSPIRACY (78%); NATURALIZATION (78%); FEDERAL INVESTIGATIONS (78%); EXCISE & CUSTOMS (76%); TERRORISM (71%); POLITICAL DEBATES (64%)

Organization: US CITIZENSHIP & **IMMIGRATION** SERVICES (93%); US DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY (90%); **US IMMIGRATION** & CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT (55%)

Geographic: UNITED STATES (79%)

Load-Date: December 15, 2007