

# USCIS SERVICES GUIDE 2025



**GREEN CARDS  
CITIZENSHIP  
WORK PERMITS  
FEES • PROCESSING TIMES**

# Key Statistics

**9M+**

## Applications Received

Applications received by USCIS annually (8.6 million completed in FY 2022)

**8.7**

## Months

Family-based green card processing time (after priority date current)

**7**

## Months

Employment-based green card processing time

**5.5**

## Months

Current naturalization processing time

**0.6**

## Months

Work permit processing time for most categories

**365**

## Days

Asylum seekers must wait before applying for work permits





# Understanding USCIS



## What is USCIS?



U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is the federal agency responsible for overseeing lawful immigration to the United States. They process applications for immigration benefits, conduct naturalization ceremonies, and determine eligibility for various immigration statuses.

## Why Proper Navigation Matters



Immigration processes have strict deadlines and specific requirements. A single mistake can delay your case for months or result in denial. Understanding the system helps you avoid costly errors and navigate efficiently toward your immigration goals.

## USCIS Service Centers



USCIS operates multiple service centers across the country. Where you file depends on your location and application type. Processing times vary significantly between centers, so understanding the system can help set proper expectations.

# Understanding Priority Dates and the Visa Bulletin

## Understanding Priority Dates & The Visa Bulletin

Your priority date, established when your initial petition (I-130 or I-140) is filed with USCIS, determines your "place in line" for a green card. The Department of State's monthly Visa Bulletin (available at [travel.state.gov](https://travel.state.gov)) indicates which priority dates are "current," allowing you to proceed with Form I-485 filing.

❌ **Critical Warning:** Filing Form I-485 before your priority date is current results in automatic rejection and forfeiture of the \$1,440 filing fee.

## Immediate Relatives vs. Preference Categories

### Immediate Relatives (No Wait Required):

- Spouses of U.S. citizens
- Unmarried children under 21 of U.S. citizens
- Parents of U.S. citizens (if the citizen is 21 or older)

### Preference Categories (Must Wait for Priority Date):

- All other family relationships
- All employment-based categories (with limited exceptions)



# Green Card Applications (Form I-485)

## What It Is

Adjustment of status to permanent resident allows eligible individuals to become lawful permanent residents without leaving the United States.

## Who Qualifies

- Family-sponsored applicants with approved I-130 petitions
- Employment-based applicants with approved I-140 petitions or in certain categories
- Diversity visa lottery winners
- Asylum seekers (one year after asylum grant)
- Refugees (one year after refugee admission)

## Required Documents Checklist

### Basic Requirements for All Applicants:

- Form I-485, Application to Register Permanent Residence
- Copy of government-issued photo ID
- Birth certificate with certified English translation
- Medical examination (Form I-693) by USCIS-approved civil surgeon
- Two passport-style photos
- Copy of arrival/departure record (I-94)
- Form I-94 showing current status

### Family-Based Specific Requirements:

- Copy of approved Form I-130
- Proof of relationship to petitioner
- Sponsor's Form I-864, Affidavit of Support
- Sponsor's tax returns for the last three years

### Employment-Based Specific Requirements:

- Copy of approved Form I-140 (if required)
- Employment verification letter
- Form I-864 or I-864EZ if needed

# The Multi-Form Packet Strategy

## Filing Forms Together

Filing multiple forms together as a "packet" allows related applications to be processed simultaneously, saving time and money.



### Common Packet Combinations

- **I-485 + I-765 + I-131:** Green card application with work permit and travel document
- **I-130 + I-485 + I-765:** Family petition with immediate adjustment (immediate relatives only)
- **Multiple I-485s:** Principal applicant with spouse and children filing together

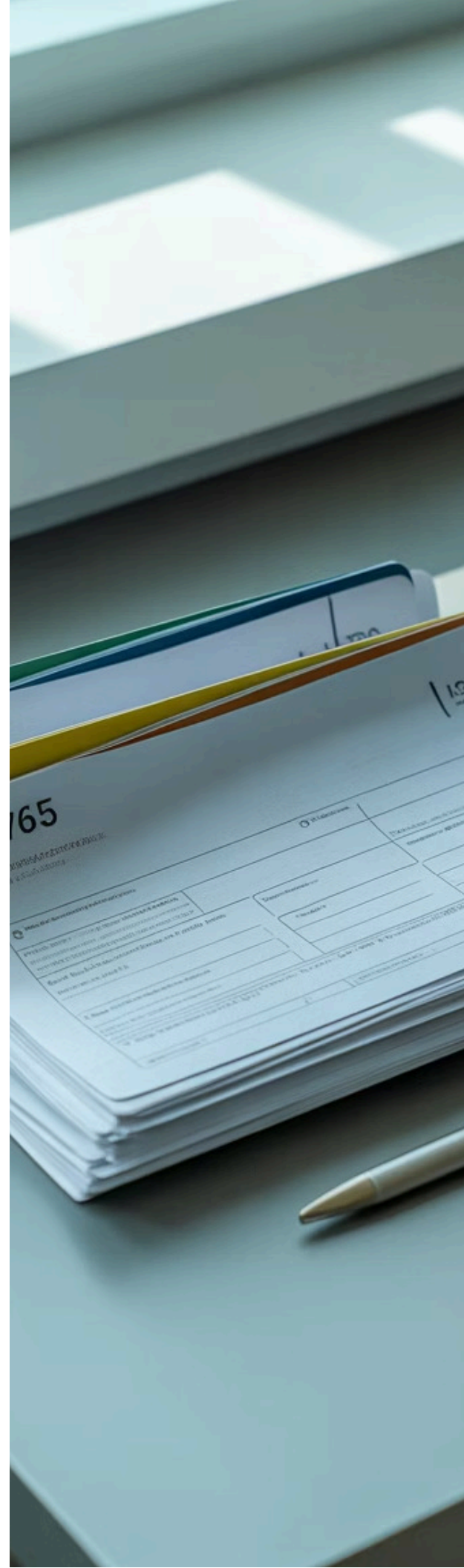


### Advantages of Packet Filing

- Single filing fee covers related applications
- Coordinated processing reduces delays
- Work authorization available while green card is pending
- Travel document (advance parole) allows international travel



**Important:** Only file packets when all forms are eligible at the same time. Premature filing wastes significant money.





# Naturalization: Understanding Continuous Residence vs. Physical Presence

## The Two-Part Residency Requirement

Naturalization requirements have two separate parts that people often confuse. Here's the detailed explanation:

### Continuous Residence:

- Maintaining your permanent home in the United States for the required period
- 5 years for most applicants, 3 years if married to a U.S. citizen
- Absences of 6+ months create a presumption of broken residence
- Absences of 1+ years almost always break continuous residence

### Physical Presence:

- The total number of days physically inside the United States
- 30 months required for 5-year residents
- 18 months required for 3-year residents (married to citizens)
- All trips outside the U.S. count against this requirement

**Example:** You can maintain continuous residence while failing physical presence if you take many short business trips that add up to more than the allowed absence time.



# Naturalization: Planning Your Travel and Documentation

Beyond understanding the core residency requirements, successful naturalization involves meticulous planning of your travel and careful compilation of necessary documentation.

## Planning Your Travel

Keep detailed records of all international travel, including:

- Passport stamps
- Airline tickets
- Hotel receipts
- Work travel documentation



### Eligibility Requirements

- At least 18 years old
- Permanent resident for 5 years (or 3 years if married to a U.S. citizen)
- Physically present in the U.S. for at least half the required residency period
- Continuous residence in the U.S. for the required period
- Demonstrate English language ability (speaking, reading, writing)
- Pass civics test on U.S. history and government
- Be of good moral character
- Demonstrate attachment to the Constitution and U.S. laws



### Required Documents

- Form N-400, Application for Naturalization
- Copy of permanent resident card (front and back)
- Copy of current marriage certificate (if applicable)
- Divorce decrees for previous marriages (if applicable)
- Tax returns for the last 5 years (or 3 years if married to U.S. citizen)
- Selective Service registration (males aged 18-25 during registration period)



# Work Permit Categories and Specific Requirements

## Understanding Category Numbers

The script mentions that "you must identify your exact category number on the application." Here are the most common categories with their specific requirements:

### Category (a)(5) - Asylees

- Must wait 365 days after filing complete asylum application
- Exception: Can apply immediately with "Recommended Approval" notice from asylum office

### Category (c)(9) - Adjustment of Status Applicants

- Can file immediately with I-485 application
- Valid until green card decision is made

### Category (c)(3)(B) - Students (OPT)

- Must complete degree requirements first
- Apply within 90 days of degree completion
- Valid for 12 months (STEM extensions available)

### Category (c)(26) - H-1B Spouses

- Spouse must be in valid H-1B status
- H-1B holder must have approved I-140 or be in 6th year of H-1B

### ✓ Updated Processing Times

Work permits now process in under 1 month for most categories, significantly faster than previous years. This makes timing applications even more critical to avoid gaps in authorization.

# Document Preparation Guide

## Obtaining Certified Copies

### What Qualifies as Certified:

- Documents certified by the issuing agency
- Notarized copies of original documents
- Copies certified by a U.S. consular officer abroad

### What Does NOT Qualify:

- Regular photocopies
- Faxed copies
- Digital printouts of online documents

## Translation Requirements

### Who Can Translate:

- Professional translation services
- Certified court interpreters
- Anyone fluent in both languages (including yourself)

### Translation Format Requirements:

- Complete translation of the entire document
- Translator's certification statement
- Translator's name, signature, and contact information
- Statement of translator's qualifications

Original Documents

Certified Copies

Translation

Submit to USCIS

# Photo and Medical Requirements

## Passport Photo Requirements

### Specifications:

- 2x2 inches in size
- Head size between 1 inch and 1 $\frac{3}{8}$  inches from chin to top of head
- White or off-white background
- Taken within 30 days of application
- Clear, front-facing, with both eyes open

### Photo Guidelines:

- No glasses (unless for medical reasons with signed statement)
- Neutral expression with mouth closed
- Religious head coverings allowed if worn daily for religious purposes
- No uniforms except religious clothing worn daily

## Medical Examination Process

### Finding a Civil Surgeon:

- Search USCIS website for authorized doctors in your area
- Schedule appointment after completing Form I-485
- Bring vaccination records and medical history
- Cost ranges from \$200-500 depending on location

### Required Vaccinations:

- COVID-19
- MMR (Measles, Mumps, Rubella)
- Polio
- Tetanus and Diphtheria Toxoids
- Pertussis
- Haemophilus influenzae type B
- Hepatitis A and B
- Varicella
- Influenza
- Pneumococcal disease
- Rotavirus
- Meningococcal disease



# Online Filing Step-by-Step Guide

## Creating Your USCIS Account

1. Visit [uscis.gov](https://uscis.gov) and click "Create an account"
2. Provide email address and create strong password
3. Verify email address through confirmation link
4. Complete personal information profile
5. Set up two-factor authentication for security

## Filing Process

### Before You Begin:

- Scan all supporting documents in PDF format
- Prepare payment method (credit card, debit card, or bank transfer)
- Set aside 1-2 hours for completion
- Save application frequently

### Step-by-Step Filing:

1. Log into your USCIS account
2. Select "File a form online"
3. Choose your specific form (I-485, N-400, etc.)
4. Complete all required fields (marked with asterisks)
5. Upload supporting documents
6. Review application for accuracy
7. Pay filing fee
8. Submit application
9. Print receipt notice immediately

## After Filing

### Immediate Steps:

- Print and save receipt notice
- Create folder for all USCIS correspondence
- Set up case status notifications
- Add important dates to calendar

### Ongoing Monitoring:

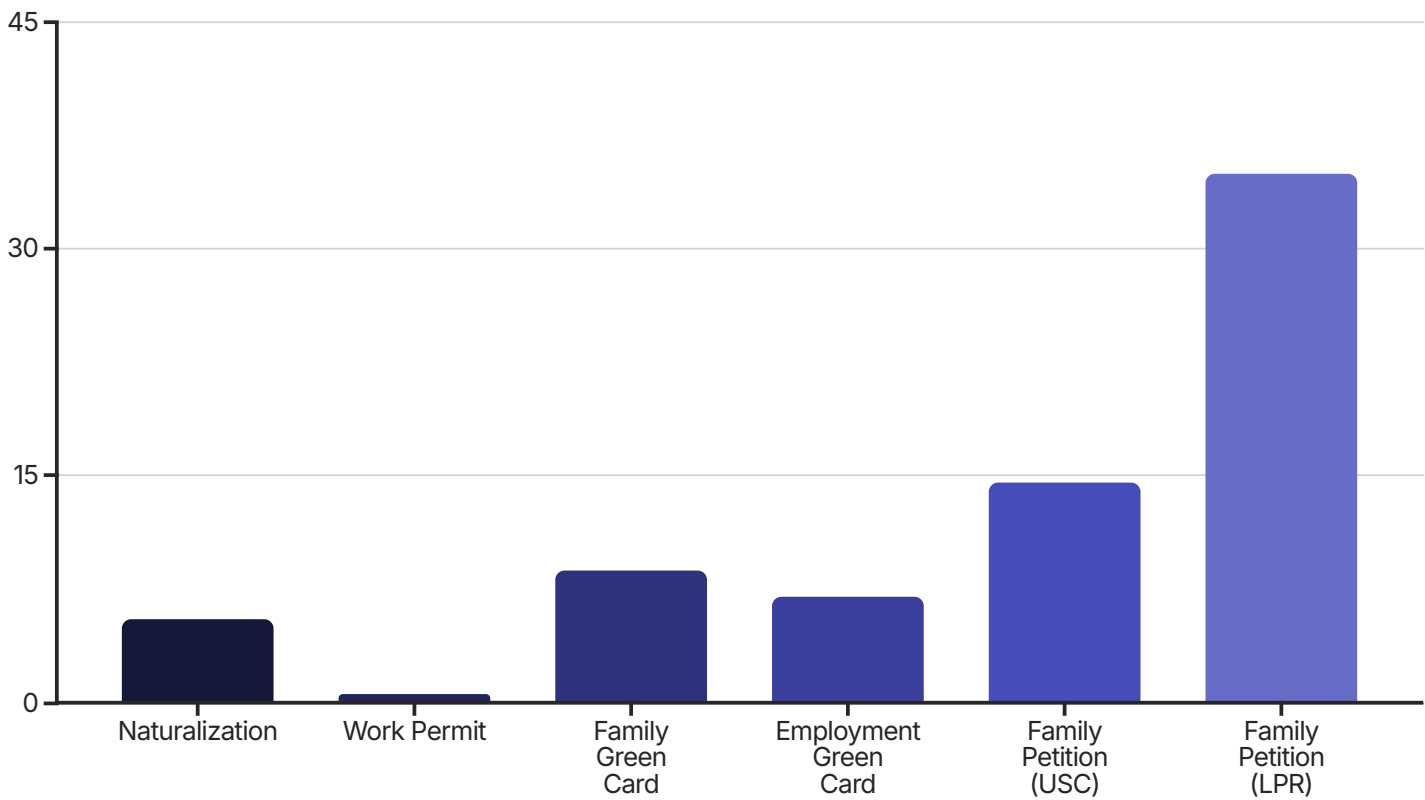
- Check case status weekly online
- Respond to any USCIS requests within deadlines
- Update address within 10 days of moving
- Keep copies of all submissions

# Current Processing Times and Costs

## Updated Processing Times (2025)

Application Type	Median Processing Time
Form N-400 (Naturalization)	5.5 months
Form I-765 (Work Permit)	0.6 months (most categories)
Form I-485 (Family-based Green Card)	8.7 months (after priority date current)
Form I-485 (Employment-based Green Card)	7 months
Form I-130 (Family Petition - USC sponsor)	14.5 months
Form I-130 (Family Petition - LPR sponsor)	35 months
Form I-140 (Employment Petition)	8.1 months

Processing times are median completion times and can vary by service center. Always check current times at [uscis.gov](https://uscis.gov).



# Fee Structure and Payment Options

## Updated Fee Structure

Application/Service	Filing Fee	Notes
Form N-400 (Naturalization)	\$710 (online), \$760 (paper)	Reduced fee: \$380 for qualifying applicants
Form I-485 (Green Card)	\$1,440 per person (age 14+)	Biometrics fee included
Form I-765 (Work Permit)	\$520 (online), \$575 (paper)	Varies by category
Form I-130 (Family Petition)	\$675	No biometrics fee
Form I-140 (Employment Petition)	\$715	Premium processing: \$2,805 extra

*Fees change regularly. Always verify current amounts on [uscis.gov](https://uscis.gov) before submitting applications.*

## Premium Processing

Available for select applications (I-140, I-129, some others):

- **Cost:** \$2,805 additional fee
- **Service:** Guaranteed response within 15 calendar days
- **Response types:** Approval, denial, or request for additional evidence

## Fee Waivers

### Eligibility Requirements:

- Household income at or below 150% of Federal Poverty Guidelines
- Currently receiving means-tested public benefits
- Experiencing financial hardship

### Required Documentation:

- Form I-912 with supporting evidence
- Tax returns or benefit award letters
- Bank statements showing account balances
- Proof of income for all household members



# What Happens After Filing

## Receipt Notice Timeline

### What to Expect:

- Receipt notice arrives within 2-3 weeks of filing
- Contains case number for tracking
- Shows fee payment confirmation
- Provides estimated completion date

### If You Don't Receive a Receipt:

- Wait 30 days from filing date
- Contact USCIS customer service at 1-800-375-5283
- Have payment confirmation ready
- File inquiry if no response after 30 days

## Biometrics Appointment Process

### Scheduling:

- Appointment notice arrives 4-6 weeks after filing
- Cannot be expedited except for emergencies
- Reschedule online or by calling USCIS

### What to Bring:

- Appointment notice
- Valid government-issued photo ID
- Any requested documents

### The Appointment:

- Arrive 15 minutes early
- Fingerprints, photo, and signature taken
- Process typically takes 20-30 minutes
- No results given at appointment



#### Submission

File your immigration application



#### Receipt Notice

Arrives in 2-3 weeks with case number



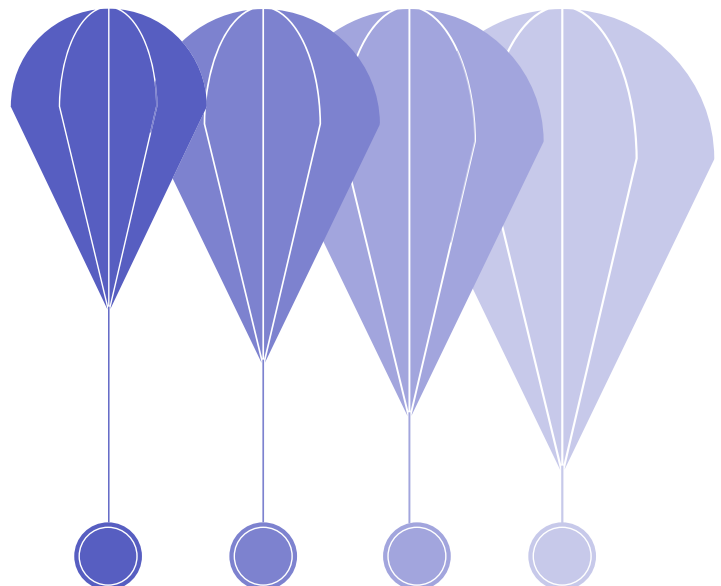
#### Biometrics

Appointment in 4-6 weeks



#### Processing & Outcome

Case review, possible RFE, interview, decision



# Naturalization Interview Process

## Interview Preparation

### Preparation Steps:

- Study civics questions using official USCIS materials
- Practice English reading and writing
- Review Form N-400 application thoroughly
- Gather any updated documents

## Interview Components

- English test (speaking during interview, reading 1-3 sentences, writing 1-3 sentences)
- Civics test (10 questions from list of 100, must answer 6 correctly)
- Application review with USCIS officer
- Background and eligibility verification

## After the Interview

- Receive written decision (approved, denied, or continued)
- If approved, ceremony date provided
- If continued, additional evidence or testing required
- If denied, appeal rights explained





# Handling Requests for Evidence (RFE)

## Understanding RFEs

An RFE is USCIS's request for additional documentation.

- Missing or insufficient evidence
- Expired documents
- Changed circumstances

## Responding to RFEs: Timeline

- Deadline stated in RFE notice
- Typically 30-87 days
- No extensions granted
- Late response leads to denial

## Responding to RFEs: Strategy

- Address every item requested
- Provide only what's requested
- Include cover letter
- Submit copies, keep originals
- Use certified mail for paper submissions

## Responding to RFEs: Common Topics

- Medical examinations
- Relationship evidence
- Financial documentation
- Employment verification
- Birth/marriage certificates



**Remember:** Failing to respond to an RFE by the deadline will result in automatic denial of your application. Always respond completely and on time.



# Troubleshooting Common Problems

1

## Address Changes

### Legal Requirement:

- Must report within 10 days of moving
- Applies to all foreign nationals with pending cases
- Failure to report can result in case denial

### How to Update:

- Use online Enterprise Change of Address (E-COA) tool at [uscis.gov](https://uscis.gov)
- Updates all pending cases immediately
- Much faster than paper Form AR-11
- Keep confirmation receipt

2

## Missed Mail and Notices

### If You Miss Important Mail:

- Contact USCIS immediately
- Explain circumstances causing missed correspondence
- Request duplicate notices when possible
- May need to file motion to reopen if case was closed

### Prevention Strategies:

- Use informed delivery through USPS
- Check mail daily during case processing
- Have backup contact person if traveling
- Update address immediately when moving

3

## Case Delays Beyond Normal Processing Times

### When to Inquire:

- Case has exceeded posted processing times
- No activity for 90+ days after expected completion
- Receipt notice shows unusual status

### How to Inquire:

- Submit case inquiry online through USCIS account
- Call customer service at 1-800-375-5283
- Schedule InfoPass appointment if needed
- Contact congressional representative for assistance

4

## Correcting Errors After Filing

### Minor Errors:


- Bring corrections to interview
- Submit updated information with supporting documents
- May not require case reopening

### Major Errors:

- May require filing motion to reopen
- Could need new application entirely
- Consider legal consultation for complex corrections

# Financial Planning Tools

## Total Cost Calculator



### Green Card Application (Family-based)

- I-130 petition: \$675
- I-485 application: \$1,440
- Medical exam: \$200-500
- Document preparation: \$100-300
- Total: \$2,415-2,915**



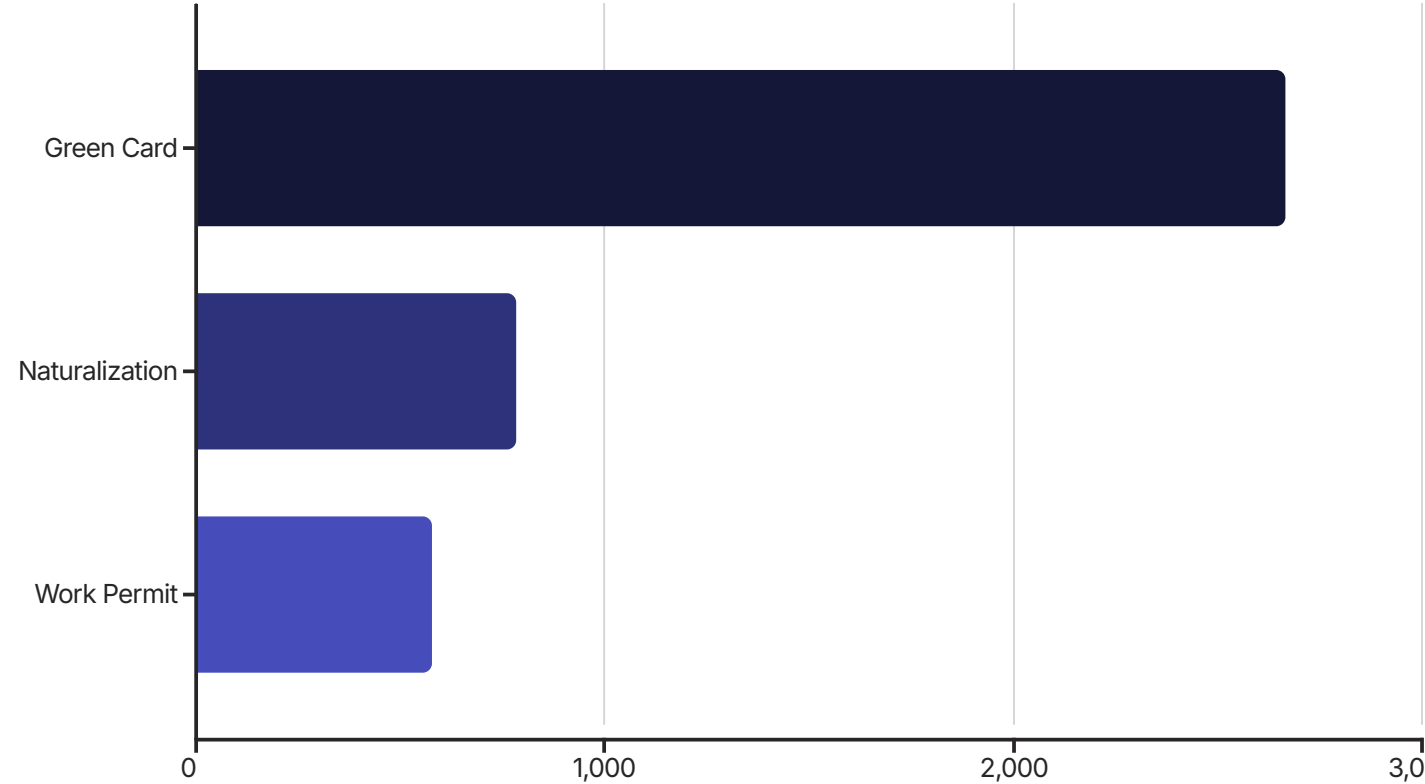
### Naturalization Application

- N-400 filing fee: \$710 (online)
- Citizenship test materials: \$0-50
- Document copies: \$25-75
- Total: \$735-835**



### Work Permit Application

- I-765 filing fee: \$520 (online)
- Passport photos: \$15-25
- Document preparation: \$25-50
- Total: \$560-595**



# Fee Waivers and Payment Methods

## Fee Waiver Qualification Worksheet

### Income Limits (2025 Federal Poverty Guidelines):

Household Size	Income Limit (150%)
1 person	\$15,060
2 people	\$20,440
3 people	\$25,820
4 people	\$31,200
Each additional person	Add \$5,380

### Qualifying Benefits:

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
- Medicaid
- Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)
- State Child Health Insurance Program (SCHIP)

## Payment Method Comparison

### Online Payments:

- Credit/debit cards accepted
- Bank transfers available
- Immediate processing
- Electronic receipts
- Lower fees for many forms

### Paper Payments:

- Money orders recommended
- Cashier's checks accepted
- Personal checks allowed for most forms
- Make payable to "U.S. Department of Homeland Security"
- Separate payment for each form



# Special Situations and Alternatives

## Travel During Pending Applications

### Advance Parole Requirements:

- File Form I-131 for travel document
- Cannot leave U.S. without approved advance parole
- Processing takes 8-13 months
- Emergency requests possible for urgent situations

### Exceptions for Certain Visa Holders:

- H, L, K, or V visa holders may travel without advance parole
- Must have valid nonimmigrant visa stamp
- Consult immigration attorney before traveling
- Risk assessment needed for each situation

## Expedited Processing Criteria

USCIS only expedites cases meeting strict criteria:

### Severe Financial Loss:

- Company at risk of failing
- Person at risk of losing critical public benefits
- Must provide detailed financial documentation

### Urgent Humanitarian Reasons:

- Grave illness or death of family member
- Critical medical treatment needed
- Must provide medical documentation

### U.S. Government Interests:

- Government agency requesting expedite
- Public safety or national security concerns
- Official government letter required

### USCIS Error:

- Processing mistake causing delay
- Must prove error with documentation

## Legal Representation Options

### When to Consider an Attorney:

- Complex immigration history
- Previous violations or criminal records
- Business or investment cases
- Repeated denials or complications
- Deportation proceedings

### Free and Low-Cost Options:

- Legal aid societies
- Pro bono programs through bar associations
- Non-profit immigration organizations
- Law school clinics
- USCIS legal orientation programs

### Choosing Qualified Help:

- Only attorneys and accredited representatives can provide legal advice
- Verify credentials through state bar associations
- Avoid notarios and unqualified consultants
- Get written agreements for services and fees

# Action Checklists

## Before You Apply

Determine exact eligibility using USCIS tools

Check priority dates if applying for green card

Gather all required supporting documents

Obtain certified translations for foreign documents

Get passport photos meeting USCIS requirements

Calculate total costs and verify current fees

Create USCIS online account

Set up organized filing system

## During the Process

Submit complete and accurate applications

Keep copies of everything submitted

Set up case status tracking

Respond promptly to USCIS requests

Attend all appointments on time

Report address changes within 10 days

Monitor processing times regularly

Prepare for interviews when required

## After Approval

Keep approval notices safe

Update Social Security records if needed

Apply for derivative benefits for family if applicable

Plan for renewal dates and future applications

Maintain continuous lawful status

Consider next steps (naturalization for green card holders)

# Official Resources and Contacts

## USCIS Resources

### Main Website: [uscis.gov](https://uscis.gov)

- Case status checking: [egov.uscis.gov](https://egov.uscis.gov)
- Processing times: [egov.uscis.gov/processing-times/](https://egov.uscis.gov/processing-times/)
- Forms and fees: [uscis.gov/forms](https://uscis.gov/forms)
- Office locator: [uscis.gov/about-us/find-uscis-office](https://uscis.gov/about-us/find-uscis-office)

### Contact Information:

- Customer Service: 1-800-375-5283
- TTY for hearing impaired: 1-800-767-1833
- Hours: M-F, 8 AM - 6 PM ET
- Military help line: 1-877-247-4645

## Educational Materials

- Citizenship test prep:  
[uscis.gov/citizenship/find-study-materials](https://uscis.gov/citizenship/find-study-materials)
- English learning resources:  
[uscis.gov/citizenship/learners](https://uscis.gov/citizenship/learners)
- Civics flashcards & practice tests



### Phone Support

Contact USCIS Customer Service for assistance.



### Legal Assistance

Access pro bono and legal aid services.

## Additional Resources

### Legal Assistance:

- American Immigration Lawyers Association:  
[aila.org](https://aila.org)
- Legal aid directory: [lsc.gov/what-legal-aid/find-legal-aid](https://lsc.gov/what-legal-aid/find-legal-aid)
- Pro bono programs:  
[americanbar.org/groups/legal\\_aid\\_indigent\\_defendants/](https://americanbar.org/groups/legal_aid_indigent_defendants/)

## Emergency Contacts

### Congressional Assistance:

- Contact your representative for case inquiries
- Provide case number & details
- Allow 30-60 days for response
- Use only when normal channels fail

### Ombudsman Services:

- DHS Ombudsman: [dhs.gov/topic/cis-ombudsman](https://dhs.gov/topic/cis-ombudsman)
- For systemic USCIS problems
- Case assistance (last resort)



### Official Website

Find forms, check processing, and track case status online.



### Emergency Contacts

For critical issues, contact Congressional office or

# Important Disclaimers

## Legal Advice Notice

This guide provides general information only and does not constitute legal advice. Immigration law is complex and changes frequently. Always consult with a qualified immigration attorney for personalized guidance on your specific situation.

## Accuracy Disclaimer

While this guide strives for accuracy, immigration policies, fees, and processing times change regularly. Always verify current requirements on the official USCIS website before taking any action.

## No Guarantees

Following this guide does not guarantee approval of any immigration application. Each case is evaluated individually based on its merits and compliance with current law.

## Professional Consultation

Complex cases involving previous violations, criminal history, or unusual circumstances should be handled with professional legal assistance.

**Remember: Taking action quickly with accurate information is the best way to navigate the immigration system successfully. This guide provides the foundation, but staying current with official sources and seeking professional help when needed ensures the best possible outcome for your case.**