

The 1-800 Number: A Case of Customer Disservice

<u>Previous Policy</u>: Until June 9, 2003, the general public and attorneys were able to contact representatives at the legacy INS/BCIS Service Centers to ask questions about the status of their cases, clarify and correct problems, and inquire about filing procedures. While this system was infamous for the length of time required to get through to an Immigration Information Officer (IIO), nevertheless, once connected with an IIO, problems and questions, including emergency case problems, were addressed with little or no difficulty. Typical problems addressed by the IIOs included an incorrect name on an approval notice, a case pending longer than the normal processing times, or failure to receive a receipt for a petition or application filed with the Service Center.

<u>Current Policy</u>: Beginning on June 9, the BCIS cut off direct phone access to the Service Centers and directed that callers (both the general public and attorneys) make inquiries through a 1-800 number system. However, as structured, the system is a failure because it does not provide a meaningful way to resolve problems. The operators on the 800 number are outside contractors unfamiliar with immigration and are given very basic "scripts" from which to field calls. They have access only to information provided on the BCIS website's case status inquiry system. In other words, they cannot tell a caller anything more than what the caller can see on-line. Given the problems with this system, Congressional offices are reporting an upsurge of immigration-related requests from constituents.

Under the new policy, 800 number operators can transfer calls to a "Second Tier" information officer—a BCIS employee who is familiar with immigration issues—or can take information from callers in order to refer the inquiry to the appropriate Service Center. These options have not helped to address problems and do not allow immediate action on emergency cases, such as an aging-out child. Operators are restricted as to the types of cases that they can refer to the Service Centers or to Tier 2, and often direct callers to write a letter to the Service Center after informing them that there isn't anything the operator can do. However, immigration attorneys have found that letters to Service Centers often go unanswered or, at best, languish for months before a response is received. In the event that a caller's request falls within the designated types of problems that can be referred, the caller is then told to wait for 30 days. If no response is received within that time frame, the caller is directed to call the 800 number again. In many cases, no response is received, or the response is non-informative.

The 800 number system also cannot correct inaccurate information on an approval notice. In the past, individuals could call the Service Center to request that such errors be corrected, and a new approval notice could be issued the same day or within just a few days. (Individuals who must apply for visas at U.S. Consulates or travel abroad and return to the United States must have approval notices that are, for security reasons, 100% accurate.)

Finally, 800 number operators have given inaccurate information to callers (which could severely damage the foreign national's immigration status) and many people have complained that operators were rude and hung up on them.

<u>AILA Survey Results</u>: Five hundred responses were received to a survey posted on AILA's website that sought information on callers' experiences with the INS/BCIS 8000 number system. Problems noted included:

- Operators simply reporting what was on the BCIS website, and refusing to meaningfully discuss the problem;
- Operators giving out incorrect information and advice;
- Operators not knowledgeable about even basic immigration concepts;
- No mechanism to resolve urgent/emergency problems;
- Operators directing callers to write to the Service Center, a process long considered futile and, at best, one causing lengthy delays in processing with the result being that pressing matters are not addressed in time;
- People forced to endure unnecessary delays because the 800 number operators could not access the file at the Service Center. Callers were then made to wait to receive a written answer to the inquiry, which answer then turned out to be uninformative;
- Operators unable to resolve simple corrections on forms;
- Many complaints about operators being rude, and hanging up on callers;
- People never receive a receipt from the Service Center for the filed petition and/or application. The 800 number operators are completely unable to confirm whether the petition or application has been received by the Service Center.

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