



## Modernizing Immigration

FPC Briefing

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### Video

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**MODERATOR:** Good afternoon. Welcome to the Foreign Press Center. We are honored today to have the new director of the Office of Citizenship and Immigration Services in the Department of Homeland Security. It's a big title. But Alejandro Mayorkas is with us. He is a former U.S. attorney from California and also has practiced law for the last few years before he was picked by President Obama to be the director of the Citizenship and Immigration Services. He was confirmed by the Senate in August, so he is fairly new to the job.

**MR. MAYORKAS:** Thank you very much. Thank you very much for being here. It's a pleasure to be in the Foreign Press Center.

I thought what I would do, before answering whatever questions you might have about our immigration system, is to share a few remarks with you, a few thoughts that are born of my several weeks in the position as the director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

In the last eight weeks, I've had the privilege of attending three naturalization ceremonies in our country -- one in West Palm Beach, Florida; one at the Department of Defense; and one here in Washington, D.C. And it is a remarkable event when one is able to see individuals who have sought citizenship, in this country, achieve that milestone in their lives. It's a noble, elegant, and deeply moving event.

It harkens me back to a time in my own youth, when I was a young teenager and I myself was naturalized with my parents and my sister. My parents brought us to this country from Cuba in 1960. And we were refugees to this country. And so it is deeply moving for me to be here before you today, as the director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

The fact that I myself was once a refugee to this country informs my views of our agency's mission and the priorities that we will carry forward, during the time that I am privileged to serve. When I speak of the values of our agency and the mission, what I mean to suggest is a very important perspective that our agency must have. And that is that we must view our work through the eyes of the individuals who come before us and the eyes of the businesses who come before us, to seek benefits to which they are entitled.

And as we do that, we must always keep in mind the most vulnerable of that group. And we must therefore dispense justice and fairness in the administration of the benefits that we are called upon to preside over.

In achieving a vision of public service for our agency, there are certain pillars that we must adhere to in our administration of benefits. One is integrity. Our processes, of course, must be true to our mission in every single respect. We must also achieve uniformity and consistency throughout our agency. We are one agency representing one nation. And it is a nation that historically has been, currently is, and forever will be welcoming to the people from all over the country, who seek to enter our nation for lawful purposes, albeit temporarily in some instances, but sometimes to make a life for themselves or sometimes to escape circumstances that drive them to live elsewhere, outside of their native homes.

What I mean by uniformity and consistency is that the individual who comes before us must have an experience based not on where they happen to be, but based on the equities of their particular cases and the provisions of law that guide our administration of the benefits.

The -- another pillar is, of course, efficiency. People sometimes have tremendous life pressures that are upon them as they seek benefits to which they are entitled. And we have an obligation to administer our benefits sensitive to those concerns, and we must do so, therefore, as efficiently and with as great a dispatch as possible.

I have, in furtherance of the mission to serve the public most ably, embarked upon a very aggressive effort to learn what the communities, whom we serve, cared most deeply about with respect to how we do our work for them. And so I have traveled thus far from -- all the way from New York to Los Angeles, to meet with community-based organizations, business groups and individuals, to better understand the concerns that the communities have in how we do our work, so that we can engage with them more robustly and deliver better service to them.

I have also traveled around the country on behalf of the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, who is President Obama's designated point person, in the effort to achieve comprehensive immigration reform. And I have traveled around the country to meet with stakeholders in that effort, to better understand what they wish to see in the context of comprehensive immigration reform, so that can inform our efforts as we pursue that presidential and departmental priority. That is something of tremendous importance to Secretary Napolitano of the Department of Homeland Security.

What brings me here today is another pillar of importance to the administration of our agency's work, and that is transparency. We are a public agency. We serve the public. And we, therefore, must be answerable to and responsive to the public. I have met with journalists in Albuquerque, New Mexico; Las Vegas, Nevada; Los Angeles, California; Washington, D.C.; Alexandria, Virginia; New York, New York; and I'm headed towards the Midwest to Chicago, Illinois, to various cities in Texas, to meet with reporters to answer questions that they might have and to communicate, through all of you, the issues of importance to us, to report on our successes, but also, quite frankly, to acknowledge our challenges so that we are accountable to the public, and properly so. We are a public-service agency, and we must, therefore, stand before the public and speak candidly of how we're doing, who we are, and who we most certainly wish to be.

Those are a few remarks. I assuredly will have others as you ask the questions that you wish, and please do so

**MODERATOR:** Before -- I would ask you to state your name and your organization when you ask a question. And wait for the microphone, please. Okay. The first question?

**QUESTION:** Zoltan Mikes, World Business Press Online, (inaudible). And my question is -- I have two questions. The first one is: What do you think about the plan of Mr. Obama of immigration reform? Why is after one year he is in office, not so much in progress?

And the second question is: Can you -- can you just tell us what do you think about the position of immigrants in the U.S.? You told us that you were also emigrating from Cuba. And if you can just compare the situation of the immigrants then and now. For example, tell you -- tell your opinion on the fact that today, also, the state police is controlling the immigrants after they cut off the line on the red light somewhere in Arizona. You know for sure about Mr. Sheriff or Mr. Mayor in Arizona. So if you can compare this situation. Thank you.

**MODERATOR:** Do you want --

**MR. MAYORKAS:** I'd be delighted. And if I may, sir, take your questions in reverse order.

Of course, it's difficult for me to compare the immigration system when I was a teenager and had other issues on my mind then, as to the system as it stands. We must recognize -- and this I should articulate quite clearly -- when we speak of pillars to achieve a value system in our agency, when we speak of our goals, it presupposes our national security. That is a foundation from which springs our additional hopes and aspirations. And so we must maintain the security of our nation, first and foremost.

I can say -- and that's one of the thoughts that comes immediately to mind when you asked your question about my experience as a young person, versus how I view the system now -- it's a very different world today than we -- than I lived in when I was 13 and when I immigrated to this country as a one year old.

With respect to comprehensive immigration reform, the President has indicated that comprehensive immigration reform is a top priority of his and has remained so. He has designated an individual, the secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, Janet Napolitano, as his point person in that effort. And she shares his commitment and his prioritization of that effort.

We have embarked on developing ideas and learning from the public what the public would most want to see in the context of comprehensive immigration reform, and so we are active. The reform process is a legislative one. It is one that the legislature will ultimately accomplish. But the President is quite devoted to the effort, and we are pursuing that vigorously.

**MODERATOR:** We'll take our second question from New York.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. My name is Olaolu Akande. I write for The Guardian newspapers of Nigeria. Thank you for coming, Mr. Director.

I just wanted to ask that -- I mean, considering the fact that one of the important ideas that this country tries to champion is the question of family reunification, and I wanted to know whether your agency would be willing, on humanitarian grounds, to consider cases of individual immigrants, who have fallen into deportation situation because of one mistake or the other, and right now they are married to American citizens, and they have family, they are important people in their community. Would you be willing as an agent to consider that it's important to keep the family together when these people have not really done anything tremendously damaging?

**MR. MAYORKAS:** Thank you very much for that question. The goal of family reunification is indeed one that we hold dear to our efforts as we try to administer the immigration laws fairly and with justice always in mind. Ultimately, our adjudications are indeed on an individualized basis, and there are mechanisms that the law acknowledges to achieve family reunification in particular cases. And that is very much a part of the work that we do.

**MODERATOR:** Yes, sir, in the middle.

**QUESTION:** Thank you very much. Frederick Nnoma-Addison, AMIP News. Congrats on your recent appointment.

**MR. MAYORKAS:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** Looking at the statistics, which is very impressive, A Day in the Life of the USCIS, and it lists very impressive statistics of number of people served, number of green cards issued, and so on and so forth. That's on the one side. On another side, we live in a country where government officials repeatedly refer to the U.S. immigration system as broken, you know. I'm trying to reconcile the two.

What is the core problem? You know, within your few weeks that you've been in office, have you been able to detect what the core problem is that has taken the immigration process down this path?

**MR. MAYORKAS:** Thank you, sir. I'm not sure we can speak in absolutes. We speak of our successes when you read a page of A Day in the Life of USCIS today. And what that is meant to capture is the successes that we achieve out in the field. We have approximately 18,000 people dedicated to the fair and just administration of our immigration laws. And so we do achieve success. That is not to say that we achieve that success within the context of a perfect system. There are indeed imperfections.

The gentleman from New York who asked me a question struck at the heart of one of the goals of an immigration system, family unification. Do the laws that we have now achieve that most ably? That's a question that is -- that I think is a valid one to ask. And so we have to take a look at the goals, as a nation, of our immigration system and ask does the structure that we have in place -- or do the mechanisms that we have in place accomplish those goals most ably, most completely and most efficiently? And where there are shortcomings, that is, indeed, what immigration reform is in part about.

**MODERATOR:** So it's here, and then we'll go to New York.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Sonia Schott, Radio Valera, Venezuela. One of the most outspoken groups here, in favor of an immigration reform, has been the Hispanic or Latino group here. And I mean, considering your background as a former Cuban or your relatives coming from Cuba --

**MR. MAYORKAS:** I'm a current Cuban as well. I'm now a Cuban-American. (Laughter.)

**QUESTION:** Okay, Cuban-American. Do you see any possibility that we can see anytime soon any immigration reform, considering the Hispanic group is the second largest in the country? And could you please describe, what are your goals in office and how the economic crisis could impact the development of this cause? Thank you.

**MR. MAYORKAS:** If I can, I believe and thank you, I think, your first question asked about comprehensive immigration reform and whether it will be delivered, given the importance of that issue to the Hispanic community, not just here but throughout the country. I can say with tremendous conviction and tremendous vigor that

the commitment of the President of the United States, the commitment of Secretary Napolitano, is unwavering with respect to achieving comprehensive immigration reform.

The second question that you ask is a very interesting and important one. And that is, what does -- what do current economic circumstances mean for our agency? We are primarily a fee-for-services agency. Our funding is primarily based on the fees that we receive from applicants. And our applications this past year, possibly by virtue of general economic conditions in the country, have dropped markedly; and therefore, we are facing financial challenges as an agency.

We remain committed to improved performance. Our performance has improved over the last two years, and we remain committed to delivering efficient and fair service, irrespective of those challenges. We will as an agency potentially have to make cuts, and we will potentially have to raise certain fees to meet the financial challenge brought about by a decline in revenue.

**MODERATOR:** We'll go to New York for the next question.

**QUESTION:** Hi, and my name is Konstantin Elovski, working with Russian ITAR-TASS News Agency. As a matter of fact, I've got a couple of questions. First one is, New York Times ran a story this month about the problem with the monitoring of the foreigners exiting the country, which made some kind of a problem with the security situation. So I'm just wondering what your agency is doing in regard to this problem.

And another one, as of now, the United States are doing a lot of work, like the biometric stuff, on the entrance of the foreign visitors to the country. Do you think it's going to be less of problems to the visitors to the United States in the foreseeable future? Thank you.

**MR. MAYORKAS:** Thank you very much for your questions. I think I understand -- understood your first question is focused on a New York Times piece. I believe you're referring to a piece on visa overstays and the ability of our system to account for that and to develop a metric system to monitor exits from our country. And that is a subject that is a focus of great attention now from a national security perspective and an efficiency perspective in the administration of our immigration system.

Your second question, I think, was devoted to -- the counter to that is the issue of biometrics or other identity-assurance mechanisms for those entering our country. And a number of proposals have been considered and are being considered. Some have been proposed by individuals, of course, outside of our agency. The discussion of biometrics is a very robust one, when one speaks of the potential for comprehensive immigration reform. And that is a subject that is under study now by our agency and by other stakeholders with a tremendous interest in immigration reform.

**MODERATOR:** The lady in the middle.

**QUESTION:** Sarantiya, TV reporter from Mongolia. Nice to meet you, Mr. Alejandro.

**MR. MAYORKAS:** Thank you.  
Likewise.

**QUESTION:** I have two questions. First, as I know, the green card process has been delayed for a quite long time. So what measures will you take, to accelerate the process? Can you tell us the usual waiting time, for example, employment-based green card?

Second question: How many actually illegal immigrants are here right now? And what do you think about the future of the illegal immigrants? Thank you.

**MR. MAYORKAS:** Thank you very much for both those questions. Let me -- your first question strikes at a very important point of our work, and that is processing times. And I think what needs to be emphasized here is, we are very proud of the progress we have achieved, over the last two years, in terms of processing times.

With respect to all of our benefits, to which people are entitled, our average processing times over the last two years -- our average across the board -- has dropped from just over twelve months to approximately four-and-a-half months. And that's something I think that our agency and the people who are so dedicated to our mission deserve credit -- deserve credit for.

With respect to the -- your second question, the number of undocumented individuals in our country today, I know that a number of institutions outside of our agency have conducted studies. And I would refer you to them, such as the Pew Hispanic Center, for example, is one of which I -- of what -- one of which I am aware. I cannot attest, of course, to its accuracy, but certainly I'm familiar with its findings.

But the President has spoken about the -- his belief that a path to citizenship should be created as part of comprehensive immigration reform for a certain population of undocumented workers in this country today.

**QUESTION:** (Off mike.)

**MODERATOR:** Yes. Wait for the mike, please.

**QUESTION:** My name is Andrei Sitov. I am with TASS, the Russian News Agency here in Washington. And thank you, sir, for coming to speak to us.

It's a follow-up to the previous question. I understood the previous question as meaning to ask you to look ahead at what will be happening with immigration in this country, especially since you referred yourself to the financial challenges. The -- are we to infer from that that there are fewer applications to -- for your services?

**MR. MAYORKAS:** This past year there has been a decline in the number of applications we have received.

**QUESTION:** Can you give us figures?

**MR. MAYORKAS:** We certainly can provide those to you subsequently.

**QUESTION:** And do you see this trend to continue? Are there reasons for that?

**MR. MAYORKAS:** I think --

**QUESTION:** Can you -- can you cite reasons for that trend? Do you see that trend as continuing -- reasons to believe that the trend may continue? I understand it was one year; it's not a trend yet. But do you see as a coming trend, and why?

**MR. MAYORKAS:** I think in terms of our planning, we do not envision a significant deviation from the pace that we experienced this past year. That is how we are managing our resources in as a responsible a way as possible. The causes of that drop in revenue is the subject of study inside and outside our agency. There are those who attribute in part that decline to the economic downturn as a whole.

**MODERATOR:** Okay. In the back.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. I'm Julio Marengo with La Prensa Grafica from El Salvador. I have two questions. You said -- you mentioned the possibility to raise fees in the future. I want to know if you have an idea of when, and how much these visas will increase.

And secondly, if the immigration reform is to be passed next year, your agency will face a tremendous amount of work -- say the main purpose is to legalize 12 million people who are already here. Have you or your agency come up with a figure of how much would this cost? And, if so, are you thinking of moving from a -- from an agency who funds itself from the fees it covers or requesting a federal budget for that?

**MR. MAYORKAS:** Thank you very much, sir. That -- I think that was three questions, and I'll answer each one of them. And I should note that I think that you answered the question of the reporter before with respect to how many people are estimated to be in this country. (Laughter.)

The possibility that fees would be raised is, I think, an example of transparency. It is something that we are forced to consider now as an agency because of the financial challenges that we face. And we felt it, therefore, incumbent to share that possibility with the public so that the public is aware of it. Whether there is a fee increase imposed, how much and when, is something that we are very focused upon now.

The question of how we as an agency are modeled financially is a question of legislation. It is important to note that in a time of economic downturn, and when applications drop, we face financial challenges, and we have to explore the options to meet those challenges, one of them being a potential fee increase.

To your third question, perhaps not -- I perhaps did not address them in the order in which you posed them -- we are preparing for what comprehensive immigration reform might entail. And our preparatory efforts are the very same efforts that we would undertake to achieve greatest efficiency as an agency.

And so we have the ability, for example, to accept certain biometric information of 6 million people in a year in our 140 or so application support centers throughout the country. We are developing a nimbleness that, should we need to address or capture biometrics of a greater-sized population of people, we are able to do so. So our efforts are well under way.

**MODERATOR:** Okay. The lady here with the --

**QUESTION:** Maria Tabak, news agency Roi Novosti. I've got also two questions. First is, could you please list some major changes that you would like to see as part of the immigration reform? And second question is that, in terms of this reset of relations with Russia, do you expect any changes in immigration policy between the two countries, and visa policy as well? Thank you.

**MR. MAYORKAS:** Well, thank you. Let me answer, if I can, the second question first, and that's with respect to any changes in immigration policy between our nation and Russia. I really cannot speak to that, as a director of the agency. With respect to changes that we would like to see, let me speak of a change that already has been implemented, because I think it is a harbinger of a very important goal of ours.

In late September, we unveiled a redesigned website that sought to provide greater information to customers, greater transparency, and be much more user-friendly. Our redesigned website achieved those goals. We unveiled it within a 90-day period. I think it was in June -- mid-June, or June 25th or so -- that President Obama requested that we redesign our website to achieve greater transparency and greater customer service. I think it was September 22nd that we unveiled it, in both English and Spanish. And it provides much greater information to our customers, both with respect to their individual cases and also with respect to what lies ahead for them in the processing of their cases and what processing times specifically might lie ahead.

One of the very important things for our agency is to transform ourselves into an electronic environment. We are a paper-based agency now. And it is very important that we enter the 21st century very strongly and that we'll develop a greater ability to serve our customers more efficiently, give customers greater access to information and achieve greater efficiencies for us as a government entity.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Olivia Hampton with Agence France-Presse. I just wanted to have a broader question about the challenges that you see in your new position, in terms of maintaining the balance between addressing national security concerns and also keeping that image that America has had of being an open country, you know, a nation of immigrants.

**MR. MAYORKAS:** I don't perceive there to be any tension, to be any tension whatsoever. I think those goals coexist very ably. Our mission is to extend benefits to individuals who are entitled to them under our laws. That means that we must be very welcoming for those who seek to enter this country through lawful means, as our laws envision. And we must be ever vigilant, in ensuring that those who are not entitled and especially those who seek to endanger our national security are prevented from doing so. I find those two goals to be perfectly capable of coexisting.

**MODERATOR:** Follow-up?

**QUESTION:** Just -- how do you address concerns? For example, you have someone who's coming in, you know, perfectly legally, but sometimes they might feel targeted perhaps, you know, because of their religion or their origin. You know, there are still a lot of cases that keep happening on a daily basis, and how do you address this?

**MR. MAYORKAS:** Well, I -- let me respond in two ways to your question, one generally and one -- well, both perhaps generally. But one is that we administer the immigration laws of our country ever mindful of the civil liberties that we are equally committed to protecting, number one.

And number two, it is very difficult to respond to a rather vague concern about the fact that there are cases every day that may speak otherwise. I would -- we -- our commitment is unwavering. If there is a case where our commitment is not realized, then assuredly we as an agency would want to know that so we can take appropriate action. That is an underpinning of our nation, not just our system of immigration.

**MODERATOR:** I think we have time for two more questions. I would give them to people who haven't already had a chance. The lady here.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Shanshan Wang with China Radio International. Mr. Director, I want to ask, have you observed a change in the applications you receive, in terms of where they come from since the financial crisis? And is it a concern for you to try to keep a balance among the immigrants in terms of where they come from -- I mean, in regional terms? And what is the average approval rate of immigrants in these years? Thank you.

**MR. MAYORKAS:** I'm sorry, can you repeat your first question? I didn't quite capture it. My apologies.

**QUESTION:** Okay. No problem. Have you observed a change in the applications you receive in terms of where they come from?

**MR. MAYORKAS:** I see. The countries of origin?

**QUESTION:** Since the financial crisis, yes.

**MR. MAYORKAS:** I don't -- I'm not able to answer that question. I think that's one where we will -- we will have to get back to you on that, whether the demographics of the applications that we are receiving has changed and whether there's a nexus between any change in economic circumstances is a nexus that we, of course, are not in a position to evaluate. But changes in demographics are something that we will get back to you if indeed we have those statistics.

Let me, if I can, add a remark to your question -- from Venezuela, I believe -- because you mention that I used to be Cuban. I am --

**QUESTION:** (Off mike.)

**MR. MAYORKAS:** Oh, no, no, no. No, quite the contrary, because this is something personal and -- oh, I take all my work very personally, but this is now familial, so it's something that I would like to come back to.

I am incredibly proud to be an American citizen. And I know what it meant for my parents to become American citizens and to see their children, who were born in Cuba, become American citizens and then to see my two younger brothers be born as American citizens. That is not to say that I have lost my identity, in terms of where I come from, where my father was born, what that meant to my father; where my mother was born and what that meant to her and what that meant to us as children growing up. So I am an American. And I am also very much my parents' child and the roots from which they themselves come. So that's something very important.

It's why also I find especially moving the naturalization ceremonies that I have been privileged to attend. And I would welcome you to accompany me on one that I attend here in town or wherever you might find yourselves. It is a remarkable event to see sometimes an individual's dreams realized, other times an individual's pursuit of sanctuary realized. Whatever the stories might be, the compelling human interest might be, there is a sense of realization and fulfillment that day that is an incredibly powerful reminder of why I am before you today, and why I am so privileged to be working next to the three colleagues who have joined me here today as well, and a few in the back, too.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, thank you very much. My name is Williams Ekanem. I write for Business World newspaper in Nigeria. When you talked about integrity and transparency, it was very interesting. (Inaudible) but I want to find out if you are aware of what happens in Lagos, Nigeria, whereby applicants find it very, very difficult to have an interview date because the process has been kind of handed over to contractors. And a lot of racketeering, so much so that getting a date for an interview is a very big problem. I don't know if you are aware of this.

**MR. MAYORKAS:** I am -- I am aware of certain country conditions and our efforts to address the challenges in particular countries. I cannot speak, sir, unfortunately, to the particular conditions in Lagos, Nigeria. I am very well -- of some of the challenges that other countries, whether in Africa or in South America or elsewhere, face. We would welcome whatever information you can provide.

I will say that we have an extraordinarily accomplished core of individuals in the international sphere who are doing remarkable work every day in Africa, in Nigeria and elsewhere. As a matter of fact, the head of our Refugee, Asylum and International Operations, Lori Scialabba, who is joining us today, was just recently honored by President Obama for her distinguished service. So, really, our work in the international arena is one of our crown jewels.

**MODERATOR:** Okay. One last question, then. Okay.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Director, welcome. My name is Enda de Getahun from Malta Information Center from Ethiopia. I just wanted to -- almost to follow up my colleague in the back from Nigeria.

Some statistics show there's about 20 adoption agencies currently from United States working in Ethiopia, and the process and some of the work at the U.S. Embassy and with the agencies also. Is there any plan for to modernize some of the process to be more sufficient so the adoptive parents can complete their adoption on time so they can return? Sometimes the number of adoptive parents is kind of-- the number is very large and then the waiting time is kind of huge currently. And if you have any information on that, for modernizing.

**MR. MAYORKAS:** Thank you, sir. And I'm not aware of the time commitments from beginning to end of an adoption case in Ethiopia specifically. But let me answer your question with respect to modernization. And if I may, it speaks to the reporter's question from Russia, as well, with respect to one of our goals.

Modernization of our agency, of our enhanced efficiency through a more modernized administration of benefits, is a top priority of our agency. We have a very robust effort underway to move not just from paper to electronic, but really to evaluate our processes agency-wide and ensure that we are bringing to bear best business practices, most modern technology, and other innovative measures to deliver better service.

**MODERATOR:** Okay. Thank you all very much.

**MR. MAYORKAS:** Thank you very much.

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