



**Homeland
Security**

Follow Up Questions and Answers

The CIS Ombudsman's Webinar Series: Naturalization and Immigrant Integration

On June 23, 2021, the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Office of the Citizenship and Immigration Services Ombudsman (CIS Ombudsman) hosted a public webinar in conjunction with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and the Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL) to discuss highlights of the federal government's interagency strategy to promote naturalization and immigrant integration.

Below is the list of inquiries received from stakeholders during this webinar and the responses provided by USCIS.

Q1. Is it best for a medical provider completing Form N-648, Medical Certification for Disability Exceptions, to type or handwrite the information on the form?

A1. There is no significant difference; however, if the answers are handwritten, the person should use black ink and make sure that entries are neat, legible, and fit within the space provided. For additional information see: [Form Filing Tips | USCIS](#).

Q2. What are some of the main reasons Forms N-648, Medical Certification for Disability Exceptions, are found to be insufficient?

A2. While USCIS does not currently track the reasons why a Form N-648 is deemed insufficient, the form is commonly denied because no appropriate explanation is provided for how the applicant's disability or impairment(s) prevent him or her from demonstrating the naturalization requirements.

Q3. When will Form N-400, Application for Naturalization, be available for eligible veterans to complete online? Are there any forthcoming changes to Form N-400 for veterans?

A3. A person applying for naturalization based on being a current or former member of the military; a spouse of a current member of the military; or a spouse, parent or child of a deceased member of the military, may currently file Form N-400 online or by mail. For more information see: www.uscis.gov/n-400. USCIS is currently performing a comprehensive review of Form N-400 to determine whether updates to the form are needed.

Q4. Is the naturalization application process faster for those completing the naturalization test in English than for applicants with an exemption that allows them to take the civics test in their own language?

A4. The overall amount of time to complete a naturalization application is virtually the same for all applicants, regardless of whether the civics test is taken in English or in another language. USCIS

continues its commitment to maintain workload balance and to ensure applicants receive timely and accurate application adjudications.

Q5. How many years does the good moral character determination cover?

A5. The applicable naturalization provision under which the applicant files determines the period during which the applicant must demonstrate good moral character (GMC). Required statutory periods are five years if filing under INA 316, three years if filing under INA 319, or one year if filing under INA 328 or 329 GMC applicable statutory period. The applicant's conduct outside the GMC period may also impact whether the applicant meets the GMC requirement if the applicant's conduct during the GMC period does not reflect that there has been reform of character from an earlier period or if the earlier conduct and acts appear relevant to a determination of the applicant's present moral character.

Q6. If an applicant's naturalization interview is descheduled, how long should he or she expect to wait to have it rescheduled? At what point can he or she reach out to the CIS Ombudsman for assistance?

A6. If a naturalization interview is descheduled by USCIS and after 30 days the applicant has not received a new appointment notice, the applicant should make an inquiry with the [USCIS Contact Center](#) (800-375-5283 (TTY 800-767-1833)) on the status of their appointment. We defer to the CIS Ombudsman to provide an answer on appropriate time frames for engaging with them.

Q7. Is USCIS considering an exception for lawful permanent residents who were outside the U.S. for more than six months due to COVID-19-related quarantines and flight cancellations, so they don't jeopardize their continuous residency and physical presence requirements for citizenship?

A7. The continuous residence and physical presence requirements are interrelated statutory requirements, and each must be satisfied for naturalization. USCIS cannot create an exception to these statutory requirements by policy. In general, the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) requires that a naturalization applicant establish that for the five years immediately preceding the date of filing the application, the applicant resided continuously within the U.S. after being lawfully admitted for permanent residence, and the applicant was physically present within the U.S. for at least half that time INA 316(a). The five-year period is reduced for spouses of U.S. citizens, and continuous residence and physical presence are not required at all for military naturalization applicants filing under INA 329(a). An absence from the U.S. for a continuous period of one year or more will automatically break the continuity of residence, regardless of the reason for the absence, unless an applicant has an approved Application to Preserve Residence for Naturalization Purposes (Form N-470). An absence from the U.S. for a continuous period of more than six months but less than one year creates a rebuttable presumption that the continuity of residence has been broken.

A naturalization applicant is also required to establish that he or she is a lawful permanent resident (LPR) and has not abandoned that status. If unforeseen circumstances, such as COVID-19 restrictions, cause an unavoidable delay in returning from a trip outside of the U.S., the trip may retain its temporary character, so long as the LPR continued to intend to return as soon as the original purpose of the visit was completed. Thus, the LPR status will not be considered abandoned. However, if the applicant remains outside the U.S. for one year or more, and the applicant does not have an approved Form N-470, the applicant will not meet the continuous residence requirement for naturalization and will need to reestablish continuous residence and physical presence in the U.S. for the required period of time prior to filing. For additional information see the USCIS Policy Manual Volume 12, Part D, [Chapter 3 - Continuous Residence, and Chapter 4 - Physical Presence](#).

Q8. Does USCIS have a plan to address naturalization cases that have been pending for years

without a decision?

A8. USCIS has made substantial progress in working the naturalization queue down since January. The pending naturalization queue was approximately 1,030,000 cases in January and is around 900,000 cases today. While still higher than we would like, we have decreased the queue by approximately 10% in six months and are now processing naturalization applications at pre-pandemic levels despite ongoing limitations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This represents USCIS staff ingenuity around interview and ceremony planning. Additionally, USCIS recently activated the use of overtime funds to augment our efforts, and we have also resumed hiring after more than a year of being unable to do so due to financial constraints. We are encouraged by our efforts to reduce the backlog but recognize that we still have a way to go.

Q9. Obtaining USCIS forms can be challenging for applicants without internet access. Does USCIS plan to return to making hard copies of forms, like the N-400, Application for Naturalization, available and offering an option to order forms by phone?

A9. There are no plans to make copies of forms available for order by phone; however, libraries across the U.S. have computers with internet access and printers, if needed, for the public. Libraries play a critical role in serving immigrant communities. Through our joint effort with the Institute of Museum and Library Services, we plan to educate librarians and, in turn, their immigrant customers on topics ranging from naturalization, the unauthorized practice of immigration law, and the importance of digital literacy.

Q10. Will paper Form N-400, Application for Naturalization, filings continue to remain an option for applicants?

A10. Yes, USCIS will continue to allow the naturalization application to be submitted by paper; there are no plans to eliminate this option.

Q11. How can naturalization applicants request to take the reading and writing tests on paper rather than on a tablet?

A11. Requests to take the reading and writing test on paper can be made in a variety of ways, including online at www.uscis.gov/accommodations; by calling the USCIS Contact Center at 1-800-375-5283 (TTY: 1-800-767-1833); or by asking the field office at any time during the naturalization process.

Q12. How can citizenship educators find out if their local field office is conducting video interviews, so they can prepare students?

A12. The use of video interviews varies across USCIS field offices based on determinations that consider a variety of factors, such as office capacity, office workloads, and health and safety considerations. Select USCIS field offices began testing in-person video interview technology in June 2020. The testing was successful, and we have now conducted video interviews in all USCIS field offices. USCIS still requires applicants, petitioners, beneficiaries, and requestors to come into field and asylum offices for their scheduled interview.

In addition to video interviews, USCIS field offices still conduct traditional interviews with enhanced safety protocols, such as requiring face coverings, plexiglass barriers between applicants and interviewers, and augmented sanitizing of equipment.

Although a video interview is in a different format than a traditional interview, all USCIS interviews follow the same adjudicative process, and the format of the interview does not impact the outcome of the adjudication. For instance, applicants, petitioners, beneficiaries, and requestors must still appear at a USCIS office, so that their identity can be verified.

During video interviews, USCIS field office employees will provide onsite assistance to applicants, such as escorting applicants to and from the interview room, helping to resolve any technical glitches that may arise, and collecting documents from applicants.

Q13. How does USCIS ensure consistency among officers in their interpretation of whether an applicant meets the requirement to speak and understand English during the naturalization interview?

A13. USCIS has Policy Manual guidance for officers to maintain consistency in the application of the test. See [Volume 12, Part E, Chapter 2 - English and Civics Testing](#) for more information about how USCIS officers determine whether naturalization candidates have met their English requirements for naturalization.

Q14. Will USCIS remove information about the 2020 civics test from its website to avoid confusion for applicants?

A14. At this time, there are still applicants who may need to access the 2020 civics test materials to determine whether they will elect to take the 2008 Civics Test or the 2020 Civics Test during their naturalization interview. Specifically, applicants who filed their Form N-400 on or after December 1, 2020, and before March 1, 2021, and were scheduled for an initial interview before April 19, 2021, are eligible to take either test, including at subsequent interviews if they fail the civics test at their initial interview. Although this group of applicants will decrease over time, USCIS is obligated to maintain their access to the 2020 Civics Test study materials. USCIS has added alerts to our website that clarify which test individuals will take and will continue to look for other ways to make this information as clear as possible for the public. Once this group of naturalization candidates are fully through the process, we will remove these materials from our website.

Q15. How soon will USCIS revise the approved answers to civics test question 100 to include Juneteenth?

A15. USCIS is now accepting Juneteenth as a correct answer to question 100. We are in the process of revising the 2008 Civics Test materials to update this answer to Question 100. The online materials will be updated first, and then the printed versions of the study materials will be updated as they are reprinted in the coming months.

Q16. Can USCIS provide more detail on how an applicant's registration to vote through a state's Department of Motor Vehicles or other state benefit application process affects the good moral character determination?

A16. If an applicant for naturalization registers to vote as part of a state benefit application, such as a motor vehicle application, USCIS will consider whether the applicant made a false claim to U.S. citizenship (see 18 U.S.C. 1015(e) or (f)) or unlawfully registered to vote under applicable federal, state, or local laws, either of which would negatively affect their good moral character determination. USCIS may consider a candidate to have made a false claim to citizenship if they affirmatively indicated they are a U.S. citizen. This includes, but is not limited to, answering "yes" to a question about U.S. citizenship. Depending on the relevant state and local law, USCIS may consider a candidate to have unlawfully registered to vote if they knowingly or willfully registered to vote, such as by completing and signing the voter registration section of a state benefit application. To be clear, it is generally not unlawful (and therefore does not affect good moral character) for an applicant to unknowingly or unwilfully register to vote.

Q17. Has USCIS considered expanding or modifying fee waivers for asylees, similar to the fee waiver for resettled refugees?

A17. DHS is currently drafting a fee rule and considering all options. USCIS hopes to publish a final rule by the end of 2022.

Asylees currently have automatic fee exemptions for the following forms:

- Form I-131 (Only if an asylee applying for a Refugee Travel Document or advance parole filed Form I-485 on or after July 30, 2007, paid the Form I-485 application fee required, and Form I-485 is still pending.)
- Form I-589, Form I-602, Form I-730
- Form I-765 (initial request by asylees and initial request by asylum applicants with a pending Form I-589)

Asylees may request a fee waiver for the following forms (or pay the required fees):

- Form I-290B
- Form I-485
- Form I-765 (renewal request)
- Form N-300, Form N-336, Form N-400, Form N-470, Form N-565
- Form N-600, Form N-600K

You may request a fee waiver if you are unable to pay the filing fees or biometric services fees for an application or petition that is eligible for a fee waiver. When you request a fee waiver, you must clearly demonstrate that you are unable to pay the fees. Additional information is available on our USCIS public page at uscis.gov/i-912. Specific eligibility criteria and instructions are available on [Form I-912](#).

Q18. Would it be possible to make Form I-912, Request for Fee Waiver, available for online filing since the evidence can be uploaded to the online portal?

A18. USCIS is currently considering making the Form I-912 available for online filing. However, we do not currently have any estimated date for availability online.

Q19. How can applicants and stakeholders share feedback with USCIS on the fee waiver process?

A19. For feedback on the fee waiver policy, please email uscispolicymanual@uscis.dhs.gov. For specific fee waiver case inquiries, please email lockboxsupport@uscis.dhs.gov.

Q20. Is it possible for individuals who are not associated with an organization to apply for funding under the Citizenship and Integration Grant Program? If so, what is required to submit an application?

A20. Only public and nonprofit organizations are eligible to apply for this grant. Individuals are not eligible to apply.

Q21. What are the criteria for qualification under the Outstanding Americans by Choice candidacy program?

A21. A recipient of the Outstanding American by Choice recognition must:

- Be a naturalized U.S. citizen for at least three years;
- Have exhibited leadership and outstanding achievements in at least one of the following categories:
 - Professional/business;
 - Culture and the arts;
 - Community service and civic participation;
 - Government service;
 - Military service; or,

- Overcoming adversity; and
- Have demonstrated responsible citizenship and a commitment to this country and the common civic values that unite us all as Americans.
- Have demonstrated a commitment to the United States through ongoing positive contributions.

Q22. Is USCIS able to provide a list of organizations in the U.S. that provide free assistance to applicants with the naturalization process and understanding naturalization requirements? Could USCIS reinstate the list previously on its website that was searchable by zip code and listed schools and community organizations that offered English and citizenship classes?

A22. USCIS does not maintain a list of all the organizations in the U.S. that provide free assistance to applicants with the naturalization process and understanding naturalization requirements.

However, the searchable list of English and/or Citizenship Class providers is still available on the Citizenship Resource Center's "[Find Help in Your Community](#)" page.

Q23. Will the report USCIS submitted to the White House outlining agency actions in furtherance of Executive Order 14012 be made public?

A23. On July 2, USCIS released the [Interagency Strategy for Promoting Naturalization](#), which is one of the reports mandated by Executive Order 14012. The strategy reaffirms USCIS' commitment to making the naturalization process accessible to all who are eligible. The strategy outlines steps that the federal government should take to promote naturalization including: raising awareness of the importance of citizenship; promoting civic integration and inclusion; providing immigrants with opportunities and tools to become fully-engaged citizens; building community capacity to prepare immigrants for citizenship; and eliminating sources of fear and other barriers that prevent individuals from accessing resources and services.