



AMERICAN
IMMIGRATION
LAWYERS
ASSOCIATION

February 23, 2023

Elizabeth Puchek
Chief Data Officer
United States Citizenship & Immigration Services
Department of Homeland Security
20 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20529

Re: Advancing Collaboration Between AILA and USCIS in the Areas of Technology Improvements and Data Standardization

Dear Ms. Puchek,

We write on behalf of the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA), the world's largest immigration bar organization. It is estimated that over 25% of cases filed with USCIS are prepared by our 16,000+ members, most of whom use case management systems to prepare their cases electronically. Though immigration attorneys have digitized much of their data and documents, USCIS presently offers limited ability to upload most applications, petitions and benefit requests, resulting in increased manual data entry burdens for the agency. We are writing in order to share efforts we have undertaken and offer suggestions to help solve these and other issues readily addressed by technology.

AILA's Efforts Toward Improving Technology and Data Standardization

For several years, AILA has recognized the importance of technology in its member lawyers' practices. AILA has held Technology and Innovation Summits in the past. Initially, USCIS attended this summit and suggested that AILA work on the standardization efforts with government agencies. Recently, USCIS acknowledged and publicized its commitment to digitization and improved processes through technology, and acknowledged that lawyers are special "repeat customers" with unique vantage points given the volume of cases processed.

AILA is educating its members and promoting technology adoption. In furtherance of this goal, AILA created its Technology and Innovation Committee which reached out to USCIS in March 2021 to collaborate on digitization, resulting in talks and listening sessions. AILA joined the Standards Advancement for the Legal Industry (SALI) Alliance, a nonprofit working towards standardizing legal terms, and created a subcommittee to establish

standard terms for immigration law with SALI. AILA also created its Technology Advisory Group (TAG) to collaborate with and disseminate information to immigration-specific case management systems company stakeholders.

We recognize USCIS's progress and efforts on this front. In January 2022, the USCIS Ombudsman held a listening session and the AILA Technology and Innovation Committee worked closely with promoting the session which focused on USCIS's Application Programming Interface (API), with the objective of developing standardized language and terminology to use for processing forms across USCIS. At our 2022 Spring Conference, the USCIS Director, the Honorable Ur M. Jaddou, reiterated the goal to work together to create digital systems and processes that benefit all.

We envision better systems will reduce backlogs, improve compliance, shorten processing times (as early electronic filings appear to be doing), and help law firms and USCIS reduce wasteful processes and redundant data entry (which will also reduce errors across the board).

We have demonstrated we can work together. We collaborated with USCIS, to help web services agents to properly develop, integrate, and maintain their interface with the E-Verify system. We also facilitated USCIS engagement with stakeholders on the new H-1B electronic registration process starting in mid-2019. Perhaps we could have shortened the re-engineering time if we had been looped in sooner. USCIS can rely on AILA's ability to raise technical issues in order to timely resolve broad problematic trends. We have continued to provide suggestions for improvements to the H-1B registration system. AILA applauds the progress USCIS has made on digitization and we would offer our assistance to further advance this progress as well as streamlining the MyUSCIS portal.

AILA and USCIS Partnering to Advance Digitization within MyUSCIS

As you are aware, MyUSCIS is used by applicants and their legal representatives to file cases, check the status of their cases, and check deadlines on cases. AILA is committed to providing assistance to improve and streamline MyUSICS. The USCIS Ombudsman, Phyllis Coven, has been seeking ways to further engage the public regarding immigration benefits. Mrs. Coven notes in her 2022 USCIS Ombudsman Annual Report to Congress that USCIS' major challenges are the number of case processing backlogs and lengthy processing times. She emphasizes that USCIS has made significant strides in its digital strategy. Electronic filing of Forms I-765 and I-821 through MyUSCIS has helped reduce these backlogs. Despite such advancements, Mrs. Coven emphasizes to Congress that there is still much work to be done.

As USCIS recognizes, there are improvements to MyUSCIS required to advance its capabilities and ease of use. We suggest the following initiatives in support of our joint collaboration on this front. We agree with Ms. Coven's recommendations (listed on page 63 of the report) and have elaborated below:

1. Set application programming interface integration. Most AILA attorneys currently have a case management and forms software platform they use to manage cases and prepare applications. We believe that utilizing APIs to connect to these platforms will streamline filing processes and assist USCIS in case processing and reducing backlogs.
2. Increase the types of applications accepted through MyUSCIS.
3. Create and initiate a targeted, nationwide myUSCIS promotion campaign to encourage individuals and employers to submit forms online. AILA can be a strong resource for USCIS in providing educational programming for our members to encourage increased e-filing.
4. Develop more meaningful incentives for filing online throughout the AILA membership and to the general public; and
- 5.. Create a central portal and system to receive and forward the Attorney Notices of Appearances (Form G-28) to the USCIS office that has the relevant benefit file. It would also be helpful if the USCIS developed an online attorney portal and an easy way for paper-filed applications to be converted to online applications. Again, AILA can assist with providing training manuals and helpful suggestions for the use of an online attorney portal, such as rapid and streamlined responses to requests for evidence (RFE) and other matters.

In addition to the Ombudsman's recommendations, we also would like to suggest the following:

1. AILA is a member of SALI as referenced above, which facilitates data standards across the legal profession. We believe that if USCIS worked with AILA to standardize data fields, USCIS could expand e-filing capabilities, improve case processing efficiencies, reduce data entry errors, reduce backlogs, thus saving valuable taxpayer money.
2. Implement a USCIS online reporting system for members to report technical issues to expedite resolution.
3. Hold quarterly stakeholder meetings with AILA on digitization efforts and collaboration.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions or thoughts, or want to schedule a meeting, we welcome you to contact Reid Trautz, Senior Director of AILA Practice and Professionalism Center at (202) 507-7647 or rtrautz@aila.org or Sharvari

(Shev) Dalal-Dheini, Director of AILA Government Relations at (202) 507-7621 or sdalal-dheini@aila.org.

Sincerely,

THE AMERICAN IMMIGRATION LAWYERS ASSOCIATION
TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION COMMITTEE

Cc:

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