

MESSAGE FROM THE OMBUDSMAN



The challenges facing U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) are substantial, but the commitment from the Secretary and the Deputy Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and thousands of USCIS public servants will help the United States meet these challenges and create a world-class immigration benefits system. During the reporting period I traveled to 39 USCIS offices, met with countless immigration service officials and stakeholder organizations, and made numerous formal and informal recommendations to improve immigration processing.

I am an immigrant and a naturalized citizen. I know that U.S. citizenship represents freedom and opportunity for millions of people around the world. Our families, our economy, and our culture are strengthened by immigrants who come to this country to realize the American dream. We all deserve an immigration process that meets the needs and aspirations of employers and individuals – citizens and non-citizens alike – that efficiently, effectively, and expeditiously provides immigration benefits, and that takes full account of DHS' national security mandate.

World-class customer service and national security are not mutually exclusive concepts; one need not be sacrificed for the other. We have made numerous recommendations for USCIS to streamline immigration processing enabling it to approve eligible green card applications within days or even hours, while enhancing the country's security. In USCIS field offices, pilot programs show that such new and innovative approaches can provide substantial improvements.

This is just the beginning. New technologies and ideas, based on the up-front processing model, will make clear that improvements in customer service and benefits processing do not come at the expense of existing backlog reduction initiatives or security, but rather go hand-in-hand with them. This office will continue to play an integral role in identifying and developing solutions to assist individuals and employers in resolving problems they encounter with USCIS.

Since July 2003, I have been privileged to work with dedicated public servants, including Secretary Michael Chertoff, Deputy Secretary Michael P. Jackson, former Secretary Tom Ridge, former Deputy Secretary Jim Loy, former Deputy Secretary Gordon England, USCIS Director Emilio Gonzalez, and former Director Eduardo Aguirre. In addition, I have been privileged to work with Joseph Mancias, Jr., who was the Director's liaison to the Ombudsman and a career member of the Senior Executive Service.

The preparation of this annual report could not have been accomplished without the tireless efforts of my dedicated staff of professionals who spent many hundreds of hours reviewing and validating facts and figures, as well as drafting and editing the report. I thank them for assisting me in completing it. I especially would like to thank Wendy Kamenshine who skillfully managed this complicated project.

Much work remains to build a twenty-first century immigration benefits system. We have identified the major roadblocks to success and proposed a number of workable solutions, and we are committed to working in partnership to achieve dramatic improvements in the system.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Prakash Khatri". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Prakash Khatri
Citizenship & Immigration Services Ombudsman