

VI. LOCAL OMBUDSMAN PILOT PROGRAM

The Homeland Security Act of 2002 states that the Ombudsman shall have the responsibility and authority to appoint local ombudsmen and make available at least one local ombudsman per state.¹¹⁸ In preparing to exercise this responsibility and authority, the Ombudsman initiated a pilot program to design and develop a local ombudsman office.

The Local Ombudsman Pilot Program commenced in May 2005 and was completed in November 2005. It created model operations for local ombudsman offices or field offices. The program met its goals by establishing personnel and support requirements, determining liaison responsibilities and limitations, and creating quality assurance standards and program objectives.

The pilot program also developed cost models to identify personnel, facilities, and operating costs for local ombudsman offices in various locations across the country. The pilot estimated that average establishment and annual operating costs of a single, local ombudsman's office was \$556,000. It would cost an estimated \$27.8 million to place and operate one such office in each state, in addition to the cost of operating the Ombudsman's Headquarters Office in Washington, D.C.

The issue of creating local offices will be reviewed further, but there are no budget requests for establishing such offices in FY 07. Instead, the Ombudsman is developing a "Virtual Access Ombudsman Office" to make such services available via the Internet. In addition, current FY 07 budget increases will provide additional travel funds which will enable personal contact by office representatives based in Washington, D.C., visiting various locations on a circuit-ride basis. This will enable the Ombudsman to objectively identify areas to visit based on problems presented by individuals and employers in dealing with USCIS. It will provide an efficient method of providing government services by limiting infrastructure and personnel costs and using advancements in communication.

VII. CASE PROBLEMS

By statute, the Ombudsman receives and processes case problems to assist individuals and employers who experience problems with USCIS.¹¹⁹ During the reporting period, the Ombudsman committed considerable time, resources, and attention to the case problem resolution unit. This unit also helps identify systemic problems so that the case problems encountered by individuals and employers can be avoided in the future.

It should be emphasized that petitioners or applicants still will need to pursue whatever legal avenues are available upon denial of a petition or application, even if they submit a case problem with the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman's office is not an office for filing appeals of adverse decisions.

¹¹⁸ See 6 U.S.C. § 272(e)(1).

¹¹⁹ See 6 U.S.C. § 272 (b)(2).