



Executive Summary

May 18, 2011

USCIS Transformation: Customer and Advocate Listening Sessions & Webinars

Background

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS or Agency) is undertaking an agency-wide effort to move immigration services from a paper-based model to an electronic environment. This effort is known as USCIS Transformation.

Transformation will deliver a simplified, Web-based system for benefit seekers to submit and track their applications. The new system is account-centric and will provide customers with improved service. It will also enhance USCIS's ability to process cases with greater precision, security, and timeliness.

In March 2011, the Office of Transformation Coordination and the Office of Public Engagement hosted a series of listening sessions and webinars with participants representing customers, attorneys and community-based organizations (CBOs). The purpose of these listening sessions was to inform USCIS about the benefits and challenges of moving to an electronic environment. These sessions were held in Baltimore, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Orlando, Seattle and Washington, DC. Each session reviewed Form I-539, Application to Extend/Change Nonimmigrant Status, provided a clickable demonstration and focused on creating and managing an online account and e-filing a benefit request.

Principal Themes

E-Filing Challenges

Most participants expressed an understanding of the benefits of electronic accounts. Many participants commented that, while they would prefer less stringent security requirements, they recognize that these standards need be determined by experts in the security field. Participants also informed USCIS that requiring users to reset their password every 90 days was excessive, especially given that customers might be logging into the system infrequently if applying for a benefit with a long processing time. Some participants raised concerns that language and/or technology barriers could pose a challenge for some customers. Attorneys stated that it would present a significant challenge to their business operations to use the system without paralegals and other staff having account access.

Most participants thought that USCIS should allow for a transition period before mandating e-filing which would mandate internet-based electronic applications, with limited exceptions. CBO representatives expressed concerns about having the staff and technology resources to support the needs of customers should the Agency mandate e-filing. Many attorneys and CBO representatives also had concerns about less technology savvy customers being able to e-file. However, most customers in the listening sessions stated they were comfortable with e-filing.

Some participants suggested that USCIS provide additional direct support to applicants; suggestions included a live chat feature within the system or kiosks/scanners in USCIS field offices. Many CBO representatives suggested that USCIS support CBOs as they build capacity to support Transformation by providing technology resources, funding, or training programs.

Online Application Process

Participants suggested that the system provide information on the process for applying online prior to account setup. Some participants suggested that a demo similar to the one shown during the sessions be made available. Participants, especially attorneys and CBO representatives, overwhelmingly preferred that the system include both form numbers and application names. Many customers who attended the sessions were comfortable with the system being available in English only. However, many attorneys and CBO representatives thought that the system should be available in multiple languages. In addition, many participants felt that a lack of alternative languages would drive customers to go to notarios. Many attorneys would prefer to e-file an application by filling out an online form as they felt that answering questions screen by screen using the wizard was inefficient.

Submitting Evidence and Reviewing the Application

Participants would like to be able to view an exhaustive list of required and supplementary evidence before they begin an application. Participants would also like to be able to upload different file types (e.g. jpeg, pdf) when submitting evidence. Many attorneys expressed concern that the system might limit their ability to submit additional evidence beyond what is listed in a drop down menu.

When reviewing an application, many participants would like to be able to make changes directly in the review screen, rather than return to the wizard. Participants were comfortable with the e-signature process but would like to have a way to electronically establish a client-attorney relationship. While most customers were comfortable submitting payment online, some attorneys and CBO representatives expressed concerns that some customers may not have access to the payment methods provided.

Account Management

Participants were comfortable using their account to manage applications and especially liked having the ability to reschedule appointments and view case status information. While participants liked viewing up-to-date case status information, some participants would like to be able to view additional information, such as interactions with USCIS employees and actions employees will take to remedy case issues. Participants also encouraged USCIS to provide as much detail as possible when displaying and updating case status information.

Follow Up

The Office of Transformation Coordination and the Office of Public Engagement would like to thank everyone that participated in the feedback sessions for sharing their time and perspectives. The responses provided by external stakeholders are invaluable to the Transformation program and help inform decisions on how USCIS will conduct business in the future. The outcomes from these sessions are provided to our design and development teams to support an interactive building process that relies on external feedback for input and validation. USCIS will hold future feedback sessions throughout the country to inform and prepare the Agency for this exciting transition. We encourage stakeholders to participate in these and other feedback opportunities with USCIS.