

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-4602

May 4, 2021

The Honorable Tracy Renaud
Acting Director
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services
Washington, DC 20529

Dear Acting Director Renaud,

As a member of the House Homeland Security Committee, I appreciate the continued commitment of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to its mission to administer the nation's immigration system and the dedication its staff has shown during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, some of my constituents in Virginia's second congressional district have experienced significant difficulties receiving biometric appointments at USCIS field offices.

The immigration process for those seeking a better life in the United States can be difficult, expensive, and long, often lasting many months and years. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, USCIS field offices suspended normal operations to ensure the health and safety of staff and applicants. However, these measures have caused backlogs with scheduling USCIS biometric appointments, further extending the immigration process for many of my constituents.

My office was recently informed that the USCIS Washington District Office, which covers Maryland, North Carolina, Virginia, and Washington D.C., has approximately 72,000 cases pending biometric scheduling. Many constituents have conveyed their frustration with the lack of communication from USCIS offices and the difficulty learning the status of their biometric appointments. My constituent services staff have advocated on behalf of several constituents, but the extensive backlog continues to adversely prolong applicant immigration cases.

I respectfully request responses to the following questions:

1. What is causing the delays in scheduling biometric appointments?
2. What is the current average time an applicant waits to receive a biometrics appointment at the Norfolk field office?
3. What is USCIS doing to reduce this backlog?
4. What guidance have USCIS field offices received regarding biometric processing times?
5. What is USCIS doing to improve their communication with applicants?
6. What is USCIS doing to accommodate high priority and emergency cases in a timely manner and how does USCIS prioritize these cases?

ELAINE LURIA
2ND DISTRICT, VIRGINIA

HOUSE ARMED SERVICES
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CHAIR OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY
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Thank you for your prompt attention to these questions.

Sincerely,



Elaine G. Luria
Member of Congress

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services
Office of the Director
Camp Springs, MD 20588-0009



**U.S. Citizenship
and Immigration
Services**

May 18, 2021

The Honorable Elaine Luria
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Luria:

Thank you for your May 4, 2021 letter to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) regarding biometrics appointments.

As you noted, USCIS temporarily suspended in-person services at our offices to help slow the spread of COVID-19 and ensure the safety of our staff and communities. Although our Application Support Centers (ASCs) have since reopened to the public, they are not yet operating at full appointment capacity due to necessary COVID-19 health and safety protocols. These temporary closures and capacity limitations at the ASCs, accompanied by other processing delays, created a substantial volume of cases awaiting biometrics appointments.

USCIS has taken definitive action to mitigate delays to our customers such as extending operating hours at ASCs and expanding the use of previously submitted biometrics where possible. We continue to look for efficiencies and plan for potential easing of COVID-19 restrictions, which will allow us to increase our processing capacity and reduce appointment delays. We have provided responses to your questions in the attached enclosure.

Thank you again for your letter and interest in this important issue. Should you require any additional assistance, please have your staff contact the USCIS Office of Legislative Affairs at (240) 721-3801.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tracy L. Renaud".

Tracy L. Renaud
Acting Director

Enclosure

U.S Citizenship and Immigration Services' Response to Representative Luria's May 4, 2021 Letter

1. What is causing the delays in scheduling biometrics appointments?

Due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, we have experienced delays in scheduling or rescheduling application support center (ASC) appointments for submission of biometrics. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) temporarily suspended in-person services between March and June 2020 to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and ensure employee and customer safety. As a result, we cancelled approximately 280,000 appointments. USCIS began a phased reopening of our ASCs in July 2020, after we implemented safety protocols. Since reopening, there have been sporadic and temporary ASC closures for reasons such as local stay-at-home orders, COVID-19-related cleaning, and extreme weather. The primary factor causing delays in biometrics appointments is the requirement for six feet of social distancing at all ASCs.

2. What is the current average time an applicant waits to receive a biometrics appointment at the Norfolk Field Office?

Biometrics appointments are scheduled based on the prioritization of benefit types, considering adjudication capacity and processing times. Within a benefit type, USCIS generally schedules appointments on a first-in, first-out basis. Therefore, there is no comprehensive average wait time for a biometrics appointment at the Norfolk ASC. The Norfolk ASC can process 200 applicants per week and the current backlog is about 5,000 applicants. USCIS continually evaluates ASCs on a site by site basis for the feasibility of extended hours as well as rerouting customers to ASCs with smaller wait times.

3. What is USCIS doing to reduce this backlog?

To reduce the backlog, we are working to safely maximize appointment capacity at ASCs. From July to September, ASCs were operating at below 50 percent of pre-COVID levels. By late October, we increased ASC operations to approximately 70 percent of pre-COVID levels and are now scheduling approximately 12,000 appointments per day.

ASCs have reached maximum allowable capacity under current social distancing guidance. However, we continue to increase processing capacity by expanding operating hours at as many ASCs as possible – recently increasing capacity by up to 50% per site at 20 ASCs.

USCIS has also expanded the reuse of previously collected biometrics to conduct background and security checks when authorized by law, although not all applications meet the requirements for biometrics reuse. Since reopening in July 2020 USCIS has scheduled over 2.3 million ASC appointments and reused previously submitted biometrics on over 1.6 million applicants.

Furthermore, USCIS is temporarily suspending the biometrics submission requirement for Form I-539 filed by H-4, L-2, and E nonimmigrants. This will alleviate some of the

U.S Citizenship and Immigration Services' Response to Representative Luria's May 4, 2021 Letter

backlog of appointments at ASCs and enable the agency to focus on maximizing capacity.

4. What guidance have USCIS field offices received regarding biometric processing times?

USCIS field offices have been regularly updated on the status of the COVID-19 related backlog for biometrics appointments. Field offices have been provided with information on how the agency is approaching the backlog, including prioritization of certain form types for biometric appointments and the field's ability to process expedite requests based upon agency criteria.

5. What is USCIS doing to improve their communication with applicants?

USCIS regularly updates our website with the latest guidance as to how COVID-19 may impact appointments and application processing and to explain the process for rescheduling biometrics appointments. Now customers can call the USCIS Contact Center to reschedule an appointment, as opposed to previously mailing the request. This decreases USCIS response time and affords us the opportunity for increased communication with our customers.

6. What is USCIS doing to accommodate high priority and emergency cases in a timely manner and how does USCIS prioritize these cases?

The USCIS Contact Center triages inquiries into two categories: urgent and non-urgent. Urgent cases are responded to within 72 hours and if a customer meets the criteria, the Contact Center can make emergency ASC appointments, as well as schedule counter appointments at field offices where we can provide the benefit (commonly referred to as Infomod). For example, if a customer needed to travel due to a death in the family, the Contact Center could schedule the biometrics appointment and schedule an appointment at a field office where the document could be issued. If the Contact Center cannot schedule the appointment(s), they will send a service request to the appropriate office to manage the high priority/emergency.

Additionally, USCIS has shared guidance with field offices on processing high priority and emergency cases. This guidance is to ensure local offices are prepared to quickly respond to emergency requests for biometrics appointments in a consistent manner. Field offices review the expedite request based on established criteria. This criteria accounts for unique situations, professions, military requirements, financial hardship, and medical emergencies. The field offices are also able to request individual exceptions for critical requests.