



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

July 23 2021

Tracy Renaud
Acting Director, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services
2707 Martin Luther King Jr. Ave. SE
Washington, D.C., 20528

SUBJECT: Religious leaders' I-360 petitions

Dear Acting Director Renaud

We write to express our serious concerns regarding the backlog of I-360 immigration petitions for religious workers at the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). The increased processing time for immigration petitions has forced thousands of religious leaders back to their home country, leaving their congregation in a time of need. We request that USCIS work to address the backlog of petitions swiftly so that petitioners are able to focus on assisting their communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of the continuous support that our religious leaders provide for local communities. These faith leaders contribute many essential services for the good of their congregation: religious ceremonies, spiritual and emotional counseling, hospital visits and providing comfort. Facilitating support for mental and emotional health is vital to the overall welfare of our communities.

While dealing with COVID-19 pandemic-related losses, communities have also felt the loss of their faith leaders. Immigrant religious leaders are having to return to their home countries to avoid negatively affecting their ongoing immigration proceedings due to a backlog in the USCIS processing of I-360 immigration petitions. This has come to our attention because many members of our faith leaders in our communities have had to return back to their home countries - leaving their congregations - so that they are able to refile their paperwork in their home country due to processing delays at USCIS.

Generally, a religious worker comes to the United States on a temporary R-1 visa. The R-1 visa can be extended for up to five years; however, for a faith leader to apply for an I-360

immigration petition, a permanent visa, they must show that they have been employed by their respective denomination for two years. This can be very difficult to prove if the religious worker's previous congregation was in another country. Therefore, applicants usually spend two years out of their five-year R-1 visa timeline documenting their employment in the United States, to prove they have been employed by their respective denomination for two years. This, although not the burden of USCIS, is the reality of the process for many religious workers, taking away valuable time needed for processing these petitions.

Prior to 2020, the average processing time for an I-360 immigration petition was eight months. The current processing time of 19 to 24.5 months is unacceptable, because the validity period of the R-1 visa may expire before a decision is made. We urge the USCIS to urgently address the backlog of I-360 petitions. Religious workers provide crucial support to our communities' health and mental well-being during these difficult times.

Thank you very much for your consideration, and I look forward to your reply. Should your staff have any questions, please contact Congressman Kahele's staffer Serena Li at Serena.Li1@mail.house.gov.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Kaiali'i Kahele', with a stylized circular flourish at the end.

Kaiali'i Kahele
Member of Congress



U.S. Citizenship
and Immigration
Services

September 7, 2021

The Honorable Kaiali'i Kahele
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Kahele:

Thank you for your July 23, 2021 letter to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) regarding processing delays for Form I-360, Petition for Amerasian, Widow(er), or Special Immigrant, for individuals requesting special immigrant religious worker classification.

The health and safety of our workforce and communities remains a top priority at USCIS. Across all USCIS offices, the agency has experienced ongoing limitations due to the COVID-19 pandemic which have resulted in longer than average processing times, including for Form I-360 petitions for special immigrant religious worker classification. Contributing factors to the increased processing times include, but are not limited to, personnel shortages and file movement limitations, as well as the reallocation of resources to address the challenges resulting from the pandemic.

USCIS is actively working to address delays related to COVID-19 precautions by reprioritizing workloads to address immediate areas of concern, including the special immigrant religious worker petition processing delays. Additionally, USCIS has resumed hiring after more than a year of being unable to do so due to financial constraints. We are encouraged by our efforts to reduce the backlog but recognize that we still have a way to go.

Thank you again for your letter and interest in this important issue. We are committed to reducing barriers to our legal immigration system and will continue to explore ways to reduce administrative burdens, as well as decrease processing and wait times. 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, reading "Ur M. Jaddou".

Ur M. Jaddou
Director