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Office of CIS Ombudsman - Stakeholder Message on Public Engagement

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Homeland Security

Citizenship and Immigration Services Ombudsman

March 9, 2017

Dear Stakeholder,

With executive actions once again bringing changes to immigration, the Citizenship and Immigration Services Ombudsman – an independent, impartial and confidential office within the Department of Homeland Security – continues to perform our statutory [mission](#) to assist individuals and employers experiencing problems with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Engagement with stakeholders including state and local officials, Congressional offices, national and community-based organizations, attorney bar associations, employers and the associations that represent them, and individuals, remains essential to accomplishing this mission. Indeed, with extensive changes to policies and programs being implemented in the areas of parole, discretion, and refugee admissions, among others, public engagement is more necessary than ever – both for our office and for USCIS.

The Ombudsman regularly hosts public engagements in Washington, D.C. and travels throughout the country to meet with immigrant communities and other stakeholders. To achieve our mission, this year we have set a goal to hold or participate in 95

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stakeholder engagements, and we are well on our way to meeting this ambitious objective.

The public is welcome to attend our in-person stakeholder engagements regardless of immigration status. For our monthly teleconference series, we give stakeholders the option to participate anonymously by stating their location only, rather than their names. This approach is consistent with both generally accepted Ombudsman principles as well as our authorizing [statute](#).

In 2003, the United States Ombudsman Association issued "[Governmental Ombudsman Standards](#)," which state:

"The Ombudsman should have the privilege and discretion to keep confidential or release any information related to a complaint or investigation. This standard balances the need to protect sensitive information so that a complainant can come forward, and witnesses and subjects can speak openly, with the need to disclose information as a part of an investigation or public report."

While not legally binding, this standard is similar to a provision of our authorizing statute, section 452 of the Homeland Security Act of 2002, which states that at the Ombudsman's "discretion" we may not "disclose to [USCIS] contact with, or information provided" by individuals and employers.

From time to time, individuals or employers contact the Ombudsman's Office to report fraud or other unscrupulous behavior they believe warrants enforcement action. In response, we provide the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) tip line (1-866-DHS-2-ICE), so that those making inquiries can contact ICE directly. The Ombudsman's Office does not partake in immigration enforcement activities.

With respect to USCIS, public engagement is an area where the agency has made great strides in recent years. USCIS seeks to "engage the public through transparent dialogue that promotes participation and feedback." USCIS has held multilingual engagements in Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, and Arabic, and on substantive areas including employment verification, humanitarian relief for victims of domestic violence and certain other crimes, and just last week the Immigrant Investor Program (EB-5). USCIS is using an online tool, called the [USCIS Idea Community](#), to ask for your ideas and opinions on the services the agency provides.

Public engagement is vital to USCIS' work. We believe that effective, efficient administration of the U.S. immigration benefits system requires ongoing engagement between the agency and affected stakeholders. Now is the time for the Ombudsman's Office and USCIS to engage in robust public engagement and re-commit to transparency in agency policies and practices.

Of course, meaningful engagement is a two-way street. We encourage the public to continue to participate actively in this process.

Finally, we are pleased to announce that the Ombudsman's Office has a new design for our [online case assistance form](#). It is meant to be easier to navigate and more user-

friendly on mobile devices. Please take a look and tell us what you think. If you have waited 60 days past USCIS processing times and have tried to resolve the matter through the USCIS customer service options, but still need help resolving a problem with an application or petition, you can use this simple form to ask the Ombudsman's Office for assistance.



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