

Trump Freezes Hiring for Immigrant Services

By Eric Katz

February 24, 2020

The Trump administration has issued a hiring freeze for non-asylum officers at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, pausing any new onboarding for positions related to benefits and programs for legal immigrants.

The decision has left applicants with offer letters in a holding pattern, unsure of their future at the agency or how long they will have to wait. The potential hires said they have heard little to clarify their status from USCIS, with officials telling them the offers remain suspended indefinitely while the agency sorts out budgetary issues.

"I screamed, cried with joy at my cubicle and immediately replied to USCIS that I would accept the job offer," said Karen, a pending immigrant services assistant at USCIS and one of many potential employees who now sit in limbo. That was just before Thanksgiving. In December, Karen, who asked that her last name not be published, received a follow-up email from the agency.

"The Office of Field Operations is currently under a hiring freeze due to fiscal year 2020 budgetary constraints," the email read. "As a result of the hiring freeze, your tentative offer of employment and corresponding entrance on duty date are hereby placed on indefinite administrative hold until further notice."

USCIS is moving forward with background checks during the freeze, putting employees in an awkward position.

"I had to tell the supervisor that I was given a job offer at another agency," said Karen, who currently works in a different federal position. "My supervisor keeps asking me when am I leaving and I keep telling her that I am under a hiring freeze with no date given."

The decision to pause hiring for most positions follows a hiring surge at USCIS for asylum officers. Ken Cuccinelli, acting Homeland Security Department deputy secretary who is also serving as USCIS director, last year announced the agency would boost its asylum office workforce [by 50%](#) and add hundreds of new support staff. The number of new asylum cases has more than doubled over the last five years and the current backlog is at all-time highs. As of March 2019, more than one-in-five asylum officer positions [sat vacant](#).

Another USCIS applicant who asked to remain anonymous out of fear of retaliation received an offer letter in October with a January start date. She worked at another DHS agency in Florida, but she and her husband felt it was time for a change so she applied for a USCIS position in Raleigh, North Carolina. They flew to Raleigh to apartment hunt, signed a lease and bought furniture. On Dec. 13, as they were driving up to North Carolina from Florida, she received a call from a USCIS human resources official. Her offer was suspended indefinitely. The new hire explained her situation and all the expenses she had already incurred.

"I am sorry, there is nothing we can do," the HR official said.

The woman and her husband spent 10 days in North Carolina before returning to Florida. Luckily, she said, the renter for her house had not yet signed the contract. Because her official separation date had not yet occurred, she was able to get her job back with the other DHS agency.

By January, she had received no further contact from USCIS. She has now given up. She had to break her lease in Raleigh, which cost her close to \$7,000. The \$5,000 in furniture she purchased had already left the warehouse and could not be returned. She is paying a mover \$3,000 to bring it to Florida so she can sell it.

Due to all the costs associated with the move, she will no longer accept the job once USCIS resumes hiring.

USCIS declined to answer any questions related to the hiring freeze, saying through a spokesperson that officials would not discuss specifics of “internal personnel matters.”

“We continually monitor staffing needs and balance that against available resources to ensure we remain capable of adjudicating all petitions fairly, efficiently, and effectively on a case-by-case basis,” the spokesperson said. “Our staffing is at or near its highest levels ever, but we are always mindful stewards of our resources. We remain dedicated to protecting our nation’s immigration system.”

Both employees said they heard from current USCIS employees that the agency announced in a town hall meeting the freeze would continue through at least the summer, and overtime is also indefinitely suspended.

For now, Karen plans to continue to wait for her new job at USCIS. She will consider other opportunities that arise, she said, but her true desire had been work for the agency to help immigrants. As an added bonus, the new job would cut her total daily commute from three hours down to one.

“I was heartbroken,” she said when she found out about the freeze. “I feel sad and frustrated at times that I was so close to leaving my current job and entering USCIS, where I have always wanted to work.”

By Eric Katz

February 24, 2020

<https://www.govexec.com/workforce/2020/02/trump-freezes-hiring-immigrant-services/163282/>