United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 21, 2016

VIA ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSION

The Honorable Jeh Johnson
Secretary
Department of Homeland Security
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Secretary Johnson:

We write to express serious concern about an apparent push by your department to rush the adjudication of naturalization applications before the upcoming presidential election, presumably in an attempt to create as many new citizen voters as possible.

Specifically, we are seeking answers about a copy of an internal agency communication from supervisors at a U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) field office asking adjudicators to expedite and even work overtime to adjudicate pending N-400 (naturalization) applications. According to the attached email sent to adjudicators in the USCIS Houston field office on July 21, "The Field Office *due to the election year* needs to process as many of their N-400 cases as possible between now and FY 2016" (emphasis added). The email encourages staff to work overtime to move their cases, almost certainly to the detriment of processing times for other immigration benefit applications, and announces that the office would be opened on weekends to accommodate such overtime work.

Your department seems intent on approving as many naturalization cases as quickly as possible at a time when it should instead be putting on the brakes and reviewing *past* adjudications, especially in light of this week's Office of Inspector General report that found USCIS granted U.S. citizenship to at least 858 individuals from "special interest" countries (i.e. countries that are of concern to the national security of the United States) or countries with high rates of immigration fraud, who had final deportation orders under another identity.[1]

Unfortunately, we have been down this road before. In the year preceding the 1996 presidential election the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the predecessor agency to USCIS, established the notorious "Citizenship USA" (CUSA) initiative. Previously, the INS had been granting citizenship to 300,000 to 400,000 aliens per year, but under CUSA that

[1] "Potentially Ineligible Individuals Have Been Granted U.S. Citizenship Because of Incomplete Fingerprint Records," Office of the Inspector General, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, OIG-16-130 (Sep. 8, 2016), available at https://www.oig.dhs.gov/assets/Mgmt/2016/OIG-16-130-Sep16.pdf.

increased to 1.1 million cases.[2] The apparent push to naturalize as many aliens as possible in time for them to vote in the election resulted in cut corners that endangered national security and public safety.

For example, a House Judiciary Committee hearing in 2000 revealed that the INS had naturalized more than 180,000 aliens under the CUSA initiative without doing fingerprint checks.[3] In addition, more than 80,000 aliens had fingerprint checks that generated criminal records, but were naturalized anyway.[4] An accounting firm also did a sample file review and reported in February 1998 that more than 90 percent of all CUSA cases were adjudicated improperly, including more than 70 percent with defective or nonexistent fingerprint checks.[5] The study concluded that at least 11,500 individuals, and perhaps many more, were naturalized despite their disqualifying criminal records.[6] Reports at the time referenced evidence of the strong possibility of a political motivation for the rush to naturalize, including a letter written to then First Lady Hillary Clinton by Chicago Alderman Daniel Soilis, a leading advocate of CUSA, who observed that the program could "provide the Democrats with a strategic advantage" and that "people stuck in Chicago's naturalization bottleneck represent thousands of potential voters."[7] At a hearing before the House Committee on Government Reform and Oversight in 1996, a letter from the officer in charge of the INS Fresno Field Office was introduced into the record in which the officer states that the INS had been told "to naturalize everyone who filed form N-400 prior to April 1, 1996, in time for them to vote in the November election."[8]

We sincerely hope history is not repeating itself.

Therefore, please explain what you are doing or will do to reassure adjudicators that naturalization applications should not be rushed for inappropriate political reasons. Please also explain what steps you are taking or will take to assure our Committees and the American people that background and fingerprint checks will not be weakened, ignored, or completely eliminated. Additionally, we would appreciate an opportunity to interview the author of the July 21 email, identified as a Branch Chief in the USCIS Houston Field Office.

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[2] "Justice Department Inspector General's Investigation of Citizenship USA," Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Immigration and Claims of the Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. House Of Representatives (Sep. 7, 2000), p. 7, available at http://commdocs.house.gov/committees/judiciary/hju67344.000/hju67344_0.HTM.
[3] Id. at 8.
[4] Id.
[5] Id.
[6] Id.
[7] Sara Fritz, "Gore Immigrant Program Role Draws Fire," The Los Angeles Times (Oct. 6, 1996), available at http://articles.latimes.com/1996-10-06/news/mn-51224_1_vice-president.
[8] "Oversight of Immigration and Naturalization Service Program Citizenship USA," Committee on Government Reform and Oversight, Subcommittee on National Security, International Affairs, and Criminal Justice, U.S. House of Representatives (Sep. 10 and 24, 1996), p. 66, available at https://www.archive.org/stream/oversightofimmig00unit/oversightofimmig00unit_djvu.txt.

We ask that you respond to our concerns as soon as possible, but not later than October 1. If you have any questions, please contact Kathy Nuebel Kovarik of the Judiciary Committee at 202-224-5225 or Brooke Ericson at 202-228-0079 of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

Charles E. Grassley
Chairman
Committee on the Judiciary

Ron Johnson
Chairman
Committee on Homeland Security
and Governmental Affairs

Attachment

cc: John Roth
Inspector General
U.S. Department of Homeland Security