

# INS reform funded but not assured

■ The agency promises big improvements with more financing and staff.

By Sean Scully  
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After years of bumbling and mismanagement, the Immigration and Naturalization Service is promising big changes. It's got all the money and staff an agency could want, and Congress promises to give it more.

Problem is, people don't seem to believe it.

"For more years than I care to remember, the INS has come to the Hill with promises and not been able to deliver," said Rep. Silvestre Reyes, Texas Democrat and a career INS employee before coming to Congress.

"The agency is a big mess," one skeptical Republican Senate aide said flatly.

In the wake of a major scandal — the Citizenship USA program, which may have naturalized as many as 11,500 ineligible immigrants in 1996 — the INS is preparing to unveil a major reorganization plan by April 1. The agency won't offer specifics yet, but it promises "accountability, communication, and uniformity" in the future.

In hearing after hearing before Congress, INS and Justice Department officials have described a

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glowing future, including widespread use of technology to defend the U.S. borders and reduce the vast backlog of eligible people waiting to become citizens — now at least two years long.

And the agency appears to have the means to do it. The budget has nearly tripled in six years, from \$1.5 billion in 1993 to an expected \$4.2 billion in 1999.

The agency has already made progress to "overhaul the long-neglected immigration system, restore the rule of law to our borders and revitalize our immigration system," Commissioner Doris Meissner said at a news conference this month.

Still, an air of skepticism hangs over the INS from both political parties and from outside groups across a wide ideological spectrum.

"We hope [the reform] happens," said Cecilia Munoz, vice president of policy for the National Council of La Raza, "but we'll believe it when we see it."

The problem?

The INS has been beset with scandal and management trouble for as long as anyone in Washington can remember.

The Citizenship USA disaster is the most visible problem, but in recent years the agency has also been stung by disclosures that officials lied to legislators visiting a detention center in Miami and by reports that private testing agencies were taking bribes to falsify citizenship tests.

In December, congressional investigators reported the agency had no accounting process to measure the effectiveness of billions spent since 1994 in controlling illegal immigration along the Mexican border.

Every week "another shoe drops," said Rep. Lamar Smith, Texas Republican and chairman of the House Immigration and Claims Subcommittee.

"They've organized and reorganized and reorganized the reorganization," Mr. Reyes said. "It's created a tremendous amount of frustration on the Hill."

Some legislators, such as Rep. Harold Rogers, Kentucky Republican, are so fed up they want to give up on the INS entirely. Mr. Rogers, chairman of the House appropriations subcommittee that funds the INS, wants to break the agency into four parts, an idea suggested by a congressional commission on immigration in 1997.

The roots of the disarray go deep in Washington history. Franklin Roosevelt's Labor Secretary Frances Perkins said that on her first day at work, she met seven different men who claimed to be "in charge of immigration."

She successfully lobbied to remove the troubled agency from her department. The president moved it to the Justice Department, where it remains today.

"To begin with, it was a neglected agency. Nobody really cared about the INS," said Lyle Ryter, vice president of U.S. Border Control, an immigration activist group. "It was a backwater."

That neglect led to an almost unmanageable structure. The regional commissioners — once four, now three — and 33 district directors were allowed a flexibility almost unheard of in other federal agencies.

"The INS is designed as a bunch of fiefdoms ... one of the principals problems is that even if the INS commissioner issues an instruction ... that doesn't mean anybody is going to do anything about it," Ms. Munoz said.

The agency's management structure proved embarrassingly archaic in the 1980s, when hundreds of thousands of refugees flooded U.S. shores from Cuba, Southeast Asia and Haiti. The agency was strained further by the 1986 immigration law that granted a sweeping amnesty to illegal aliens and imposed new regulations to prevent a new wave of illegal immigrants.

That strain led to the wide-

spread mismanagement and chaos identified by investigators in the 1980s.

The number of people applying to become citizens surged from 207,000 in 1991 to 1.1 million in 1995. That led to the near collapse of the naturalization process in Citizenship USA, which critics say was a crass political effort to naturalize Democratic-leaning immigrants before the 1996 election.

"Once they lost control, it was like a ball spinning out of control," said Sen. Judd Gregg, New Hampshire Republican and chairman of the Senate appropriations subcommittee that funds the INS.

Robert Bach, executive associate commissioner for policy and planning, said the Clinton administration was well on its way to solving the historic management problems in 1993 and '94 when the crush of would-be citizens hit.

"The problems we solved in the institution were really old problems," inherited from past administrations, he said. "Then we had to solve the huge increase in numbers."

Former INS officials, however, say the INS will never be an efficient organization so long as lawmakers and the public remain divided between sympathy for immigrants and fear over losing control of the borders.

Congressmen "are conflicted," said Sid Rawitz, an immigration lawyer and retired INS employee. "On one hand, many of them — Republicans as well as Democrats — want tough enforcement of the laws. But on the other hand, these ethnic voting blocs gain strength every day, so they are afraid."

"They do have good people down at the rank and file, but nobody can do a good job if the mission keeps changing," said Jim Dorsey, a former internal auditor for the agency.

"The INS is a reflection of the prevailing political philosophy," Carter administration INS Commissioner Leonel J. Castillo said. "If the wind blows west, it blows west. If it goes the other direction, they have no choice but to follow."

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