

March 26, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Senate Majority Leader  
S-230 U.S. Capitol  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker of the House  
H-232 U.S. Capitol  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Chuck Schumer  
Senate Minority Leader  
S-221 U.S. Capitol  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
House Minority Leader  
H-204 U.S. Capitol  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi, and  
Minority Leader McCarthy,

The undersigned organizations write to strongly urge you to codify the availability of immigration and naturalization fee waivers as you consider providing discretionary funding to ensure that U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) does not suspend its critically important work.

As stakeholders who represent clients and applicants for whom approval of requests for humanitarian protection, work authorization, family unity and citizenship can make the difference between fortune and doom, we foresee unacceptably dire economic and social consequences to the massive furloughs and eventual layoffs that USCIS would adopt absent further Congressional support. At the same time, our nation cannot afford to price millions out of access to naturalization and other services for which no proof of income is required in order to make up for an avoidable revenue shortfall precipitated by unnecessary administrative red tape and temporary prohibitions on visa issuance and admissions. Any restructured agency budget and accompanying fee schedule must be built around preservation of access to U.S. citizenship and other forms of status that advance American interests and protect the most vulnerable noncitizens.

Fee waivers are a central feature of the immigration system that has fueled our nation's financial success and established our position of moral authority. They are only available in cases where the applicant's income is inapposite to qualification for benefits, because the program in question operationalizes our firmly-held opposition to torture, authoritarian restrictions on freedom of speech and movement, and other abuses; carries out our belief in family unity; or furthers our economic interests. In these cases, safeguarding access for all not only proves our integrity, but also expands opportunity for every American. Legal permanent residents applying for naturalization account for significant shares of fee waiver requests in a typical year. In preparation for this process, these individuals study English and U.S. history, and the skills they gain help them to increase their annual average earnings upon naturalization: employed naturalized citizens' average annual income is 44 percent higher than the average income of working noncitizens. Naturalized citizens are more likely to be employed, to be homeowners, and to pursue higher education than their noncitizen counterparts. The confidence that citizenship imparts also encourages investment in entrepreneurial endeavors. All of this activity puts more

money in the hands of federal, state, and local governments to provide for the public welfare, and simultaneously results in more job creation and less use of public benefits.

Because fee-waiver-eligible programs that confer citizenship to long-term residents, and protective status to vulnerable individuals, are so closely associated with increased stability and self-sufficiency, it is especially beneficial when lower-income people access them. However, if USCIS eliminates most fee waivers as it proposed to do in its November 2019 Notice of Proposed Rulemaking concerning 8 CFR § 103.7, as many as hundreds of thousands of people each year will forego application, and all Americans will lose as a result. Extensive surveying and social experimentation have demonstrated that increased costs dissuade individuals – particularly those with lower incomes – from applying for citizenship and other benefits.

For example, USCIS received more than 1 million naturalization applications in calendar year 2007, the bulk of them prior to implementation that year of a fee increase of more than 80 percent. After this price hike took effect, the number of new N-400s dropped precipitously, to about 525,000 total in calendar year 2008. Stanford University's Immigration Policy Lab (IPL) concluded in reports published in 2019 that naturalization application volume did not rebound until fee waiver form standardization led to an increase in nonprofits educating clients about the option, and helping them complete requests. Thereafter, the naturalization rate of those eligible people with the lowest incomes increased. Even among those who are most inclined to naturalize and most knowledgeable about the process, like groups of people who had registered their interest in citizenship through the public-private partnership NaturalizeNY, IPL found that receipt of a voucher to pay for all application costs doubled the citizenship application rate from 37 to 78 percent.

In sum, contrary to the agency's claims, eliminating fee waivers would not increase USCIS's revenues appreciably, as many or most potential recipients would opt not to apply for benefits at all. Instead, fee waiver elimination would cause the unconscionable loss of financial and social opportunities for individual American families, communities, and the national economy as a whole. It is critical that Congress act to preserve them as it addresses USCIS's budget shortfall.

Thank you for your consideration and prompt efforts to maintain the immigration system that is so central to the growth and identity of our nation.

Sincerely,

African Communities Together  
Alianza Nacional de Campesinas  
Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Atlanta  
Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Los Angeles  
Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC  
Asian Counseling and Referral Service  
Asian Law Alliance  
Asian Pacific American Legal Resource Center

Asylum Seeker Advocacy Project (ASAP)  
AsylumWorks  
BONDING AGAINST ADVERSITY  
Boulder Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship Immigration Justice Task Force  
Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington  
Catholic Legal Services, Inc.  
Center for Gender & Refugee Studies  
Center for Victims of Torture  
Central American Resource Center (CARECEN) of California  
Chinese Information and Service Center  
Church World Service  
Citizenship News  
Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA)  
Dominicanos USA  
Empowering Pacific Islander Communities (EPIC)  
Entre Hermanos  
Esperanza Legal Assistance Center / Immigrant Connection at Heritage Church  
GMHC  
HIAS Pennsylvania  
Human Rights First  
Human Rights Initiative of North Texas  
Immigrant Legal Resource Center  
International Refugee Assistance Project  
International Rescue Committee  
Jewish Family and Children's Services  
Just Neighbors  
Korean Community Center of the East Bay  
Korean Community Service Center  
Latin American Coalition  
Legal Aid Justice Center  
Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition  
Michigan Immigrant Rights Center  
Mujeres Latinas en Accion  
NAACP  
NALEO Educational Fund  
NAKASEC Virginia  
National Council of Asian Pacific Americans - NCAPA  
National Immigration Forum  
National Network for Immigrant & Refugee Rights  
National Partnership for New Americans  
OneAmerica  
Oxfam America  
Proyecto Vida Digna  
Rian Immigrant Center  
Southeast Asia Resource Action Center  
Tahirih Justice Center  
The Advocates for Human Rights  
The Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI)  
The International Institute of Metropolitan Detroit, Inc

The National Immigration Law Center  
UnidosUS  
West African Community Council  
Wind of the Spirit Immigrant Resource Center  
Witness at the Border  
World Relief Corporation