

Weekly Immigration Round-Up: U.S. Embassies to Address Visa Backlog; Family Detention Center Closes; Sweeping Immigration Reform Stalls

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U.S. Consulates to Prioritize Immigrant Visa Backlog

The Biden administration announced this week that it was directing U.S. embassies and consulates a priority on the processing of fiancé(e) visas and permanent residence visas (better known as “green cards”). The announcement reverses course from the previous administration, which had halted most green card applications filed abroad.

The new directive seeks to reduce an enormous backlog of visa applications currently pending around the world. In large part due to the previous administration’s cessation of visa processing, the backlog grew from less than 100,000 in January 2020 to almost 500,000 in February 2021. While embassies and consulates will continue to give high priority to spouses, fiancés, and children of U.S. citizens, they will also process applications from other relatives, including parents and siblings of U.S. citizens and spouses and children of permanent residents.

The State Department is aiming to start application interviews to clear the backlog by April 2021. While the interviews typically are done in-person, Julie Stuftt, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Visa Services, has stated that they are continuing to consider alternative ways to safely conduct the interview process.

Detention Center for Immigrant Families Closes

On Sunday, U.S. Senator Bob Casey (D-PA) announced that all immigrant families had been released from the Berks County Detention Center in Leesport, Pennsylvania, and that the prison no longer had any immigrant inmates. Berks County was one of three detention facilities in the United States dedicated to housing immigrant families.

Senator Casey stated that an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) official informed his office that the last of all families were released on Friday, February 26. The release of detainees was the result of an extended, dedicated effort from immigration advocates to close the facility. Senator Casey noted that this was “a long overdue step to deliver justice to vulnerable migrant families, including children.” The families were released to relatives and sponsors living across the United

States and will be able to continue their cases with the immigration courts outside of federal custody.

The future of the detention center remains unclear: the facility is owned by the county, which has a contract with ICE worth \$1.3 million per year to house detained immigrants. Neither ICE nor the county has stated what will happen to the contract or how the facility will be used moving forward.

Vote on Sweeping Immigration Reform Delayed as Narrower Legislation Moves Forward

The House of Representatives has delayed until April a vote on President Biden's largest immigration reform bill after House Speaker Nancy Pelosi determined she did not have enough votes to pass the bill. The legislation – which provides sweeping reforms to the U.S. immigration system related to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, asylum eligibility, protection for crime victims who support law enforcement investigations, and many other issues – was previously scheduled to go to the House floor for a vote in March. Representative Tom O'Halleran (D-AZ) stated that the bill was “just not quite ready yet.”

Nevertheless, votes on more narrow immigration bills will be moving this month. One such bill is the Farm Workforce Modernization Act, which creates a pathway to legalization for current unauthorized agricultural workers, including eventually becoming a lawful permanent resident of the United States, reforming the temporary agricultural worker visa program, and requiring all agriculture employers to implement an E-Verify program to ensure their workers are authorized to work in the United States. The second bill, the American Dream and Promise Act, would provide DACA recipients, those under Temporary Protected Status, and individuals with Deferred Enforced Departure with protection from deportation and an opportunity to obtain permanent legal status in the United States.

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