



# **Backlog Reduction of Pending Affirmative Asylum Cases**

*October 20, 2021*

Fiscal Year 2021 Report to Congress



**Homeland  
Security**

*U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services*

# Message from the Director

October 19, 2021

I am pleased to present the following report, “Backlog Reduction of Pending Affirmative Asylum Cases,” which has been prepared by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

This document has been compiled pursuant to direction in the Joint Explanatory Statement that accompanies the Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act (P.L. 116-260).

Pursuant to congressional requirements, this report is being provided to the following Members of Congress:



The Honorable Lucille Roybal-Allard  
Chairwoman, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security

The Honorable Chuck Fleischmann  
Ranking Member, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security

The Honorable Chris Murphy  
Chair, Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security

The Honorable Shelly Moore Capito  
Ranking Member, Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at (240) 721-1500.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ur M. Jaddou" followed by a horizontal line.

Ur M. Jaddou  
Director  
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

# Executive Summary

Despite facing significant challenges in FYs 2020 and 2021, USCIS efforts to increase capacity and enhance the integrity of affirmative asylum case processing achieved significant successes, and new initiatives and operational efficiencies are being pursued in FY 2021. Although most of the recent challenges relate to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, the USCIS affirmative asylum program has been subject to significant resource constraints over the last several years because of circumstances beyond USCIS's control. This report details the efforts and specific actions that USCIS is taking to reduce the backlog of asylum applications, while ensuring that asylum applicants are reviewed properly for security purposes.

The backlog of affirmative asylum applications<sup>1</sup> began to grow starting in 2012 with the dramatic increase of individuals apprehended at the southwest border who were placed in expedited removal but who claimed fear of return to their home countries.<sup>2</sup> Under the law, these individuals were entitled to credible fear interviews to determine if they could establish eligibility for asylum.<sup>3</sup> These interviews can be conducted by officers trained in asylum law and standards only.<sup>4</sup> The increase in the credible fear caseload since 2012 has required a majority of USCIS asylum officers to conduct those screening determinations, thus reducing the number of officers available to conduct affirmative asylum adjudications.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the temporary closure of all the agency's asylum offices, halting all asylum interviews from March 2020 through June 2020. This hindered USCIS's ability to make progress toward eliminating the backlog. Even after the asylum offices reopened, social distancing guidelines reduced program capacity and productivity for interview-dependent asylum applications. At the close of FY 2020, the USCIS affirmative asylum backlog stood at 336,053 cases.

Nonetheless, efforts to increase capacity for affirmative asylum case processing achieved significant successes in FY 2020, and new efforts are underway in FY 2021. These efforts include expanded facilities and the hiring and training of hundreds of new asylum officers. To maximize capacity and productivity while social distancing protocols remain in place, asylum

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<sup>1</sup> USCIS defines the affirmative asylum backlog as the number of pending cases that exceeds the 6 months processing time goal, as opposed to a count of all cases pending a final decision. The Immigration and Nationality Act ("INA") provides that, absent exceptional circumstances, the agency initially must interview an asylum applicant within 45 days from the date of the application and must complete adjudication of an application within 180 days. 8 U.S.C. §§ 1158(d)(5)(A)(ii)-(iii), INA §§ 208(d)(5)(A)(ii)-(iii).

<sup>2</sup> 8 U.S.C. § 1225(b)(1)(A)(i), INA § 235(b)(1)(A)(i).

<sup>3</sup> 8 U.S.C. § 1225(b)(1)(B)(v), INA § 235(b)(1)(B)(v).

<sup>4</sup> Asylum officers must receive training on international human rights law, nonadversarial interview techniques, and country conditions information. *See* 8 U.S.C. § 1225(b)(1)(E), INA § 235(b)(1)(E), and 8 C.F.R. § 208.1(b). Such training is conducted when officers first onboard into their positions, as well as on an ongoing basis to keep the staff abreast of recent changes in laws, policies, and country conditions.

<sup>5</sup> The INA states that an alien subject to the expedited removal/credible fear process "shall be detained" pending a final determination of the credible fear claim. 8 U.S.C. § 1225(b)(1)(B)(iii)(IV), INA § 235(b)(1)(B)(iii)(IV). Regulations require reasonable fear determinations to be completed within 10 days of referral, absent exceptional circumstances. 8 C.F.R. § 208.31(b).

offices have implemented operational changes to increase interviews and case completions, and to reduce backlog growth. Examples include video-assisted interviewing, remote interview participation, and expanded telework.

Additionally, new initiatives have improved operational efficiencies and program integrity. For instance, USCIS has developed a program to assist asylum offices in identifying and completing cases that present issues post-interview. USCIS also has established a centralized vetting center in Atlanta, Georgia. Once fully operational, this center will conduct all security check and screening activities to ensure that affirmative asylum cases are “interview ready” when they are assigned to asylum officers. The screening center will reduce pre-interview preparation time and will allow officers to focus on timely completion of adjudications. USCIS also has worked closely with its technology partners to develop several tools that streamline case processing and strengthen integrity of the asylum process. Many of these new tools were developed in USCIS’s recently modernized asylum case management system. Finally, a number of additional initiatives are under development and more are being explored for feasibility, the most promising of which will be developed and made operational in FY 2022.



# Backlog Reduction of Pending Affirmative Asylum Cases

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# I. Legislative Language

The Joint Explanatory Statement that accompanies the Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act (P.L. 116-260) includes the following direction:

*Asylum Applications.*—USCIS is directed to continue to provide a report to the Committees not later than 90 days after the date of enactment of this Act on the efforts and specific actions, if any, that the agency is taking to reduce the backlog of asylum applications, while ensuring that asylum applicants are properly reviewed for security purposes.

## II. Background

The affirmative asylum backlog is the result of a prolonged, significant increase in affirmative asylum application filings and credible fear screenings, which are processed by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) asylum offices. Between FY 2013 and FY 2017, despite significant staffing increases, receipt growth in asylum office workloads outpaced the expansion of asylum office staffing and the establishment of new or expanded facilities needed to support additional staffing growth.

*Exhibit 1, Asylum Office Receipts and Staffing*

| Fiscal Year | Case Types          |                          |                            |                 | Total cases | Annual % change | Asylum Officers Onboard (Year End) |
|-------------|---------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|-------------|-----------------|------------------------------------|
|             | Affirmative Filings | Credible Fear Screenings | Reasonable Fear Screenings | MPP Assessments |             |                 |                                    |
| 2012        | 41,900              | 13,880                   | 5,070                      | n/a             | 60,850      | n/a             | 238                                |
| 2013        | 44,453              | 36,035                   | 7,735                      | n/a             | 88,223      | 45.0            | 245                                |
| 2014        | 56,898              | 51,001                   | 9,084                      | n/a             | 116,983     | 32.6            | 337                                |
| 2015        | 83,197              | 48,052                   | 8,015                      | n/a             | 139,264     | 19.0            | 349                                |
| 2016        | 114,965             | 94,048                   | 9,632                      | n/a             | 218,645     | 56.8            | 500                                |
| 2017        | 141,695             | 78,564                   | 10,273                     | n/a             | 230,532     | 5.6             | 546                                |
| 2018        | 106,147             | 99,035                   | 11,101                     | n/a             | 216,283     | -6.2            | 542                                |
| 2019        | 95,959              | 105,301                  | 13,177                     | 11,704          | 226,141     | 4.6             | 552                                |
| 2020        | 94,077              | 30,839                   | 8,721                      | 12,352          | 145,989     | -35             | 840                                |

These circumstances, along with resource and case-scheduling decisions, resulted in backlog growth. For example, USCIS temporarily diverted asylum officers to assist in overseas refugee processing in FY 2016. Another factor in the backlog growth was the temporary shift to a first in, first out (FIFO) scheduling system for asylum cases between 2014 and 2017. Historically, USCIS has had a practice of scheduling for interview the most recent applicants to file an application, known as last in, first out (LIFO). The LIFO system was intended to discourage individuals from potentially filing meritless asylum applications to take advantage of the backlog to obtain employment authorization during the period in which their case was pending in the backlog. By giving priority to the newest cases, applicants who may have filed asylum applications solely to obtain work authorization risked having their cases heard more quickly and denied during the waiting period, meaning that any efforts to file solely to obtain work authorization would be fruitless.

However, in 2014, most USCIS asylum officers were assigned to address the surge of credible fear, reasonable fear, and unaccompanied child asylum cases. Further, at that time, the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) reallocated resources to prioritize the adjudication of recent border entrants as part of a national surge operation and detailed a number

of immigration judges to hear border cases. These details necessitated the rescheduling of substantial numbers of previously scheduled nondetained cases nationwide, including certain USCIS cases, so as to adjudicate the priority border cases. This meant that even if USCIS referred an ineligible asylum applicant to the immigration court in a timely manner, the asylum application still would remain pending before EOIR past the expiration of the waiting period for work authorization. Consequently, the LIFO scheduling system's effectiveness in discouraging frivolous, fraudulent, or otherwise nonmeritorious filings was limited.

The institution of FIFO on December 26, 2014, was followed by expansion of receipts both in affirmative asylum filings and in asylum-based employment authorization documents. In the 12 months prior to the December 26, 2014, institution of FIFO, affirmative asylum applications averaged at 5,000 monthly receipts. Following the change to FIFO, monthly asylum receipts began to exceed 7,000 filings regularly for the first time since 1996.<sup>6</sup> EAD receipts also increased after this change, reaching 261,447 annual applications by FY 2017. On January 31, 2018, USCIS announced that it would return to the LIFO scheduling system. After the reimposition of LIFO in January 2018, receipts immediately fell, going from 12,282 in the month of January 2018 to 8,696 in the month of February 2018. The number of affirmative asylum applications filed per year decreased from 141,695 in FY 2017 to 106,147 in FY 2018 (-25 percent); to 95,959 in FY 2019 (-10 percent); and to 94,077 in FY 2020 (-2 percent). Since reinstating LIFO, the annual growth of the backlog has dropped to a 10-percent growth in FY 2018, a 7-percent growth in FY 2019, and a 13-percent growth in FY 2020.

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<sup>6</sup> Between 1997 and 2014, affirmative asylum receipts exceeded 7,000 or more in only 2 months. In June 2001, monthly affirmative asylum receipts reached 7,293. In April 1998, affirmative asylum receipts reached 9,171.



### III. Status Report

Despite the many challenges posed in FY 2020 and FY 2021, USCIS took numerous actions to reduce the affirmative asylum backlog, as well as to enhance the operational efficiency of the asylum program and to strengthen integrity measures.

#### A. Actions Taken to Reduce the Backlog

As part of workload planning for asylum offices, USCIS expanded asylum facilities, increased staffing, and improved recruitment processes to staff asylum offices quickly.

##### 1. Facilities Expansion and Jurisdictional Adjustments

Over the past several years, USCIS increased the number of asylum offices from 8 to 10. These offices are located in Boston, Massachusetts; Bethpage, New York; Newark, New Jersey; Arlington, Virginia; Tampa, Florida; Miami, Florida; Chicago, Illinois; Houston, Texas; Los Angeles, California; and San Francisco, California. USCIS also opened two suboffices, in New Orleans, Louisiana, and Arlington, Virginia (Arlington Prescreening Center). In addition, planning is underway to open offices in San Antonio, Texas (estimated December 2022), and Atlanta, Georgia (estimated FY 2022 second quarter (Q2)), as well as to expand in several other existing locations. USCIS also established the Asylum Vetting Center in Atlanta, Georgia, to centralize intake and case prescreening (such as background checks, security vetting, fraud analysis, and jurisdictional issues), functions that currently are dispersed across offices.

##### 2. Staffing Allocation Increases

USCIS utilizes an annual workforce planning process to assess staffing requirements, known as the Staffing Allocation Model (SAM). The SAM is focused on allocating staff to process the anticipated number of new/incoming receipts for all workloads for the next fiscal year. Since 2015, asylum office staffing authorizations in the SAM have not included staffing requirements for the completion of any prior-year receipts. Following the suspension of LIFO processing in 2014, new receipts rose too rapidly to provide new staffing allocations within the SAM for both new receipts and backlog cases. Separate planning was initiated to address the need to reduce the backlog of pending cases. USCIS now relies on a combination of internal processes and plans, unrelated to the SAM, to plan for backlog reduction.

Workforce planning is based on USCIS estimates for each adjudication workload for the coming year. These workload estimates are established through a cross-disciplinary committee (Volume Projection Committee) that forecasts receipts on the basis of statistical modeling and any recent policy changes. The following volume estimates for FY 2021 were established on June 18, 2020.

**FY 2021 New Receipt Estimates, by Program***June 18, 2020***Total Receipt Estimates**

|                           |               |
|---------------------------|---------------|
| <b>Affirmative Asylum</b> | <b>95,000</b> |
| <b>Credible Fear</b>      | <b>75,000</b> |
| <b>Reasonable Fear</b>    | <b>13,500</b> |

Using the SAM process, USCIS increased the Asylum Division’s overall staff from 600 total positions in FY 2012 to approximately 1,700 total authorized<sup>7</sup> positions in FY 2020. Significantly, USCIS increased the number of asylum officer positions from 273 to 771,<sup>8</sup> or by 182 percent, with the last staffing increase approved in FY 2019.

In terms of staff retention, as of June 2019, the USCIS Asylum Division’s onboard rate was 75 percent. Following the hiring surge in FY 2019 fourth quarter (Q4) and FY 2020 first quarter (Q1)-third quarter (Q3), the Asylum Division reached a 100-percent onboard rate overall and currently stands at 93 percent on March 31, 2021. As of FY 2021 Q1, offices that fall under the Asylum Division are staffed nearly fully, except for the Tampa Asylum Office, which is being newly established through phased facilities development.<sup>9</sup> The Tampa Asylum Office began hiring for its initial asylum officer positions in FY 2021.

To reduce the backlog, USCIS would need to keep its Asylum Division staff vacancy rate below 10 percent. Because of multiple budget priorities to address all of USCIS operations, USCIS regularly evaluates staffing enhancements recommended by the SAM.

### **3. Backlog Reduction Staffing**

Staffing for adjudication of receipts received in prior years *are not* part of the annual SAM process described above. Staffing requirements for backlog reduction are analyzed as part of the internal USCIS backlog planning effort. Further, authorizations to hire staff to reduce backlogs are considered separately from the annual SAM process.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Changes to staffing levels for USCIS directorates and program offices are reviewed, are subject to the approval of the USCIS Office of the Chief Financial Officer, and are based on the priorities of the USCIS Strategic Plan and available resources. Such approved staffing is considered “authorized” for funding within USCIS.

<sup>8</sup> In FY 2020 and FY 2021, onboard asylum officer staffing exceeded the authorized asylum officer level during an aggressive USCIS hiring initiative in which USCIS aimed to achieve 100-percent onboard staffing. To achieve this goal, the recruitment process required USCIS to make extra selections for the asylum officer position in order to account for attrition and other factors. These extra selections resulted in USCIS onboarding asylum officers above the authorized level, which is why the onboard number is above the authorized level in FY 2020 and FY 2021. The onboard asylum officer level has been decreasing toward the authorization level, as expected, during the normal course of attrition. Although this hiring initiative resulted in the onboarding of asylum officers slightly above the authorized level for this position, the onboard staffing level for the Refugee, Asylum, and International Operations Directorate overall was under the authorized level.

<sup>9</sup> Tampa currently is operating in a temporary space that is still under construction and, in FY 2021 Q1, received authorization to onboard an additional 11 employees, bringing its total staff to 16. The space will support a public-facing operation of approximately 30 employees. A second project is underway for permanent space in Tampa to support up to an estimated 180 employees. Estimated occupancy is scheduled for September 2022.

<sup>10</sup> The SAM is limited to future workloads in order to inform annual budget planning most appropriately with projected annual fee receipts and the expected costs to administer those receipts.

The most recent staffing requirements for the reduction of USCIS backlogs were established in FY 2019. That analysis concluded that a significant reduction of the staff vacancy rates of authorized positions at all asylum offices would eliminate the need for additional staffing to reduce the backlog.

Prior to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, affirmative asylum completions were at a historic high and were expected to increase rapidly in FY 2020 Q3-Q4. FY 2019 and FY 2020 saw significant total completions and likely would have begun a meaningful and steady reduction of the affirmative asylum backlog prior to the end of FY 2020 had the pandemic not intervened. Total affirmative asylum completions reached 78,580 in FY 2019 and 56,047 in FY 2020, with 33,140 completed before March 18, 2020. Once social distancing measures can be relaxed, affirmative asylum completions are expected to return to prepandemic levels.

## **B. The Challenges of FYs 2020-2021**

The circumstances in the latter half of FY 2020 and thus far in FY 2021 have necessitated that USCIS reevaluate the backlog reduction strategies implemented in FY 2019. Currently, an internal backlog plan is being assessed in USCIS. The factors affecting the affirmative asylum backlog include, but are not limited to, social distancing protocols, the success of the recent hiring surge, and USCIS's overall financial posture.

### **1. Impact of Pandemic Response Measures**

Since the June 4, 2020, reopening of the asylum offices, social distancing protocols have limited USCIS's ability to conduct affirmative asylum interviews at prepandemic levels. The asylum offices are conducting onsite, video-facilitated interviews where applicants, legal representatives, interpreters, and asylum officers are placed in separate rooms for the duration of the interview. As a result, where it once required the use of one office to conduct an affirmative asylum interview, it now requires a minimum of two or more offices to conduct the same type of interview safely. Given these constraints, the number of affirmative asylum interviews that may be scheduled safely is reduced greatly because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Under social distancing protocols, the usable space at offices has been reduced significantly, thereby reducing the asylum offices' productivity.

Moreover, most asylum offices cover large geographic areas. Besides conducting interviews at its offices, USCIS asylum officers conduct periodic "circuit rides" to other USCIS office locations within each asylum office's jurisdiction, for the convenience of applicants who live far from the asylum offices. Except for limited circumstances, however, official travel has been suspended because of the COVID-19 pandemic. USCIS will need to maximize the limited space designated for asylum officers at circuit ride locations to address these backlogs once travel is again possible. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions, space limitations made it extremely challenging for USCIS to prevent backlogs from growing in some high-volume circuit ride locations. In fact, the future asylum office in Atlanta is being established for that very reason.

Despite these pandemic-related limitations on productivity, many measures have been implemented to improve operations under social distancing protocols. Some of these changes, while driven by current operational needs, may have long-term utility in a post-COVID-19 pandemic environment. Examples include video-assisted interviewing, expanded work flexibilities, and remote applicant-centric services such as a pilot remote-attorney-participation program.

## **2. Budget Constraints and Hiring Freeze**

Although USCIS recently has opened new asylum offices, ongoing budget constraints make it challenging to acquire additional positions. With the 2019-2020 hiring surge, current staffing levels are high (93 percent across the division). Despite a lower credible fear caseload in 2020, however, social distancing requirements prevented USCIS from pivoting that staff to the affirmative asylum caseload to help reduce the backlog. Currently, asylum offices are receiving rising levels of credible fear cases, which are expected to return to pre-2020 levels.

USCIS is largely a fee-funded agency. During the spring of FY 2020, USCIS experienced a drop in new receipt filings that reduced revenue and resulted in a national hiring freeze (which recently was lifted on April 1, 2021) and reductions to nonpayroll expenditures. This affected all of USCIS, including the Asylum Division, by delaying additional hiring, facilities development, overtime, travel, and contracting.

In addition, the procurement of a contract to support the USCIS Asylum Vetting Center's intake and security check processing operation is on pause until space renovations are completed. The contract will include a new capability to handle all intake and initial security-check processing for all affirmative asylum filings. This contract is planned for the USCIS Asylum Vetting Center and was envisioned to allow asylum officers to focus more of their time on conducting interviews and on completing adjudications.

Moreover, overtime also has been a critical resource to address and mitigate the impact that the credible fear and reasonable fear border screening caseloads have on affirmative asylum processing. In FY 2019, USCIS used \$5.52 million of overtime funds to conduct border case processing after hours and on the weekends, instead of assigning more staff to those caseloads during regular work hours, which would have pulled them away from affirmative asylum processing. Through the use of overtime, USCIS was able to continue to maintain its assigned staffing levels to affirmative asylum processing.

## **C. Program Enhancements and Integrity Measures**

Although a large focus of backlog reduction has been placed on increasing the USCIS Asylum Division's capacity in terms of staff and facilities, the division also has sought to implement operational changes designed to improve program security measures, to increase the number of interviews that it can complete, to realize other efficiency gains, and to mitigate backlog growth.

Examples include:

- **Post-Interview Case Processing** – New focus has been placed on reviewing complex pending asylum applications that could not be completed immediately following the affirmative asylum interview. These periodic reviews, coordinated at a national level, assist asylum offices in identifying and completing complex post-interview cases. USCIS also has established a goal in FY 2021 to monitor post-interview pending cases, which will enable offices to move these cases forward to conclusion.
- **Centralized Case Vetting** – USCIS has established a vetting center in Atlanta, Georgia, to centralize intake and case prescreening (such as background checks, security vetting, fraud analysis, jurisdictional issues). The goal is to deliver interview-ready files to the asylum offices so that all field resources are focused on interviewing and completing cases instead of on conducting time-consuming pre-interview background checks. Centralizing functions that currently are spread across the offices allows USCIS to take advantage of economies of scale, while ensuring a consistent and holistic approach to pre-interview preparation and intake. The center also is intended to support text analytics operations (a new technology that assists in automated detection of possible fraud across affirmative asylum applications), terminations, and other noninterview functions.
- **Backlog Sweeps** – USCIS has initiated several data sweeps of the backlog to identify cases that may be amenable to expedited or noninterview processing. These include identifying for expedited scheduling, if appropriate, pending cases of principals who have gained lawful permanent resident status; triaging pending applications for applicants with approved Immigrant Visa petitions; identifying cases where USCIS lacks jurisdiction; and identifying cases involving individuals with serious criminal histories or evidence of abandonment. USCIS also extended interview waivers to individuals who appeared to be using the asylum process to request cancellation of removal in immigration court. This project has allowed for streamlined case processing and has deterred similar filings.
- **Technology** – The Asylum Division has worked closely with its technology partners to develop several tools that streamline case processing and strengthen the integrity of the process. Many of these new tools were developed in the Asylum Division’s recently modernized case management system, Global, and include the Assessment Generator Tool, which assists officers with conducting legal analyses effectively and efficiently and with recording their determinations, and centralizes fraud and security sweeps of backlog asylum cases for potential vulnerabilities. The Assessment Generator also improves the efficiency of post-interview case review, a common processing bottleneck. There are also several other initiatives in process, including a tool to facilitate note-taking and enhanced scheduling functions.
- **Data Analysis** – Asylum applications have been prioritized for online paperless filings and for the development of new case management software. With these programs, USCIS would have new data sources to monitor for and correct problems that could affect the affirmative asylum backlog. The digitization of the Form I-589 (Application for Asylum and for Withholding of Removal) and new systems that focus on the interview and decision-making processes have started this process. These tools will reduce manual data entry and the management of paper files. These tools also are expected to provide greater insight into steps that may cause delays in case processing. By having more of the process in the case management system, USCIS will be able to

review and compare processing times between offices and applicants to identify result-based best practices and the underlying reasons for any new delays in case processing.

- **Video-assisted Interviewing** – Video-assisted interviewing first was deployed when offices reopened on June 4, 2020. Video-assisted interviewing allows the officer, applicant, and other interview participants each to sit in separate offices and to communicate through videoconferencing. A variation of this interviewing method allows offices to conduct circuit-ride interviews and provides a cost-effective means of maximizing staffing resources nationwide.
- **Remote Interview Participation** – As a safety measure during the COVID-19 pandemic, regulatory action has permitted the use of telephonic government contract interpreters for affirmative asylum interviews, reducing the number of individuals who must accompany applicants to the interview. This reduction in the number of individuals coming into the offices has freed up office space, allowing for additional interviews to be scheduled. Currently, USCIS is working to pilot remote attorney participation, which further will provide for additional interviews while maintaining social distancing measures.
- **Expanded Telework** – Expanded telework flexibilities have maximized both administrative and adjudicative functions. This has allowed USCIS to reexamine operations and has made the offices nimbler in completing tasks remotely. USCIS continues to look for ways to maximize telework to free up more office space for additional affirmative asylum interviews.

## IV. Conclusion

The backlog in affirmative asylum applications is the consequence of circumstances outside of USCIS's control. Specifically, the dramatic increase in the credible fear and reasonable fear caseloads occurred while the filing of affirmative asylum applications also was increasing. However, USCIS responded with alacrity by expanding the number of asylum offices, by increasing the number of asylum officers, and by improving its overall administration of the asylum program. USCIS's planned facility and staff growth offers unprecedented capacity in the administration of the affirmative asylum program. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and budget constraints affect both the development of new facilities and the ability to operationalize the full program capacity. Nonetheless, USCIS is continuing to move forward on implementing numerous efficiencies and program integrity measures to improve current processing, while operating in a manner that is safe for the workforce and the public.

## Appendix. Abbreviations

| <b>Abbreviation</b> | <b>Definition</b>                         |
|---------------------|---|
| CBP                 | U.S. Customs and Border Protection        |
| COVID-19            | Coronavirus Disease 2019                  |
| FIFO                | First In, First Out                       |
| FY                  | Fiscal Year                               |
| ICE                 | U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement  |
| INA                 | Immigration and Nationality Act           |
| LIFO                | Last In, First Out                        |
| Q1                  | First Quarter                             |
| Q2                  | Second Quarter                            |
| Q3                  | Third Quarter                             |
| Q4                  | Fourth Quarter                            |
| SAM                 | Staffing Allocation Model                 |
| USCIS               | U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services |