



American Federation of Government Employees AFL-CIO

Local 2159

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July 13, 2020

RECEIVED

By ESEC External at 11:16 am, Jul 29, 2020

President Donald J. Trump
Acting Secretary Chad Wolfe
Acting Deputy Secretary Kenneth Cuccinelli
Deputy Director for Policy Joseph Edlow
Senator Menendez
Congressman Kim
Congressman Norcross
Congressman Payne

Dear Esteemed Leaders,

We, the duly elected representatives of the bargaining unit employees (BUEs) of the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) in New Jersey, reach out to you in a most difficult time. We are seeking your help, guidance, advice and above all leadership (aka problem solving abilities).

We workers are part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and we provide various duties in our good efforts to make our mission successful. In New Jersey we have asylum workers performing humanitarian duties to protect some of the most vulnerable in our community, who were often forced to flee their own communities to survive. We have officers and support staff working to ferret out criminal fraud in our extremely complicated immigration system and against criminal enterprises with more money and time than our resources allow. We have officers seeking to bestow benefits (after extensive vetting and scrutiny) upon people deemed worthy of naturalization, adjustment of status, work authorization within many categories of eligibility, travel documents. The laws, policy and procedures within the immigration realm are some of the most complicated in all areas of endeavor.

Through no fault of the approximately 350 BUEs in the State of New Jersey many of these workers may be furloughed and without pay for up to 90 days. USCIS management wants to blame the secretive and invisible enemy known as COVID-19 for the precipitous drop-off of application receipts, but the workers believe that there is more to it. Enormous expenditures to fund computer systems that are frequently more cumbersome than valuable is just bad business. There were rampant abuses of a fee waiver program costing USCIS hundreds of millions of

dollars and worse, loss of precious worker time to assist others. These are difficult discussions and perhaps better suited for another day regardless we need help.

We are acutely aware that there are tens of millions of American citizens and lawful workers currently out of work and we are certainly sensitive and empathetic to them. Many of those people are our family, friends, neighbors and we try to watch out for them.

The USCIS can ill afford to have a decline of our operations to about 25% of our full force. This would be especially chaotic considering we are in a pandemic that critically limits the manner in which we deal with the public. Our face to face interview processes put our workers at risk in spite of masks and sneeze guards and sanitizers. We often spend hours interviewing people in small offices with multiple applicants and their representatives. We are dedicated to our mission and to your priorities.

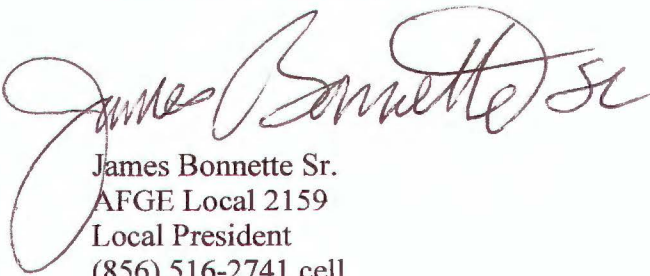
USCIS is not being transparent in their furlough notice processes. Errors have been discovered and reported and are left uncorrected. Worker furloughs in asylum are being treated differently than those workers in field offices. Many redundant managers are left in the office while the interviewing officers are placed on furlough. USCIS has not provided the AFGE Council with a list of those workers notified of potential furloughs or the scores used to determine how one worker was selected versus another worker. These are facts, but we hope to make them irrelevant by avoiding furlough all together.

Mr. President, We are national security workers who are frequently the last line of defense against criminal immigration fraud. We need your help so that we can continue to do our mission. We try to stop benefits fraud because it does have on-going ramifications against the good order of the United States of America when it is allowed to flourish. There continue to be on-going chain migration that is directly connected to criminal behavior in immigration fraud – fraud begets fraud.

If USCIS workers are not bailed out by a special loan from Congress then the damage to our work production may be enormous.

I am the local president for AFGE Local 2159 representing hundreds of USCIS employees in New Jersey. We truly need your leadership and guidance and assistance.

In Service to America,



James Bonnette Sr.
AFGE Local 2159
Local President
(856) 516-2741 cell



U.S. Citizenship
and Immigration
Services

September 16, 2020

Mr. James Bonnette, Sr.
President
AFGE Local 2159
P.O. Box 336
Mount Laurel, New Jersey 08054

Dear Mr. Bonnette:

Thank you for your July 13, 2020 letter. The White House referred your letter to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and Acting Secretary Wolf asked that I respond on his behalf.

As you are aware, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has cancelled the administrative furlough that was scheduled to begin on August 30, 2020. We made this decision based on aggressive and unprecedented spending cuts, our most recent financial projections, and in consultation with DHS and my financial staffs.

In addition to the spending cuts already recognized, we have begun taking further proactive measures to sustain our federal workforce until Congress acts. The depth of these cuts is something members of Congress asked us to avoid in the spring, with assurances of providing financial support before their August recess. As such action did not occur, these cost cutting measures will have an impact on agency operations and will result in: descoping of contracts and a reduction in the number of contractors who assist our federal workforce; restructuring contracts via bilateral modifications to breakup periods of performance into smaller increments; and continually evaluating operational requirements to potentially right-size contracts at a future date based on our financial position.

While it is true that our financial situation has somewhat improved due to the increase in revenue and receipts from their historic decline in March and April due to the COVID-19 pandemic, annual receipts and revenue are still below fiscal year (FY) 2020 projections. Without further congressional action, we will be forced to continue taking aggressive cost-reducing actions that will result in additional significant operational adjustments. We anticipate that wait times for pending case inquiries through the USCIS Contact Center will increase, case processing times will increase, and although we will continue conducting naturalization ceremonies, individuals may experience increased wait times in the adjudication of their naturalization applications as there will be fewer contractors to assist our adjudicators in preparing case files for adjudication.

Although we are currently forecasted to end FY 2020 with a carryover balance of non-premium funding in the Immigration Examinations Fee Account to cancel the current

Mr. James Bonnette, Sr.

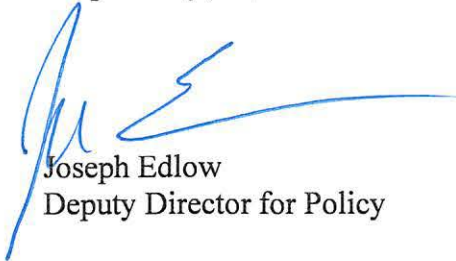
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administrative furlough, USCIS and our employees are urgently depending on Congress to act—during this budget cycle—on a long-term fix that would provide the necessary financial assistance so that we can maintain financial stability throughout FY 2021. Without such action, a future administrative furlough scenario is still possible.

This continues to be a difficult and uncertain time for our workforce. I remain committed to continuing to work with Congress to obtain the long-term assistance needed to avoid any administrative furlough of USCIS employees in the future.

Thank you for your interest in this important issue.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Joe Edlow', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Joseph Edlow
Deputy Director for Policy