



Immigration authorities hit pause amid coronavirus concerns

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The Trump administration is taking extensive measures this week to close immigration offices, cancel in-person check-ins with undocumented immigrants, and drastically scale back court hearings to help contain the coronavirus outbreak.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services announced late Tuesday that U.S. immigration offices across the country will be closed through at least April 1 to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus.

“USCIS field offices will send notices to applicants and petitioners with scheduled appointments and naturalization ceremonies impacted by this closure. USCIS asylum offices will send interview cancellation notices and automatically reschedule asylum interviews,” the agency said in a statement.

The decision will postpone asylum interviews and naturalization ceremonies, resulting in one of the biggest impacts to the immigration system.

As immigration offices temporarily close, some advocacy groups called for the Trump administration to extend deadlines for recipients of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, an Obama-era program that grants undocumented immigrants who came to America as children the legal right to stay and work. Advocates worry the closures will hamper the ability of DACA recipients to renew their protections before they expire this year.

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“DACA recipients whose work authorization and deportation protections may be expiring in the next few weeks and months will no longer be able to renew their DACA, putting tens to hundreds of thousands at risk of losing their jobs and being deported — especially as ICE continues enforcement actions,” Todd Schulte, president of the pro-immigrant group FWD.us, said in a statement Wednesday.

On Tuesday, the Executive Office for Immigration Review, the Justice Department agency that oversees the U.S. immigration court system, said it would postpone all hearings of nondetained individuals until at least April 10. The agency also announced the closure of 11 courtrooms in:

Atlanta; Charlotte, N.C.; Houston; Louisville, Ky.; Los Angeles; Memphis, Tenn.; Newark, N.J.; New York; and Sacramento, Calif.

The closures follow the agency's shutdown of the immigration courtroom in Tacoma, Wash., one of the nation's hotbeds of coronavirus cases.

A call for the complete closure of the immigration courts was made earlier in the week by the National Association of Immigration Judges, a union that represents immigration judges, the American Immigration Lawyers' Association, and the union representing Immigration and Customs Enforcement trial attorneys. The three organizations in a statement Sunday said the Justice Department had "failed to institute adequate measures to protect our court's personnel and the public during this public health crisis."

In a press call Tuesday, the immigration judges union said that judges and staff in courtrooms had already become sick, and that keeping the courts open would jeopardize the safety of many others.

Alex Nowrasteh, director of immigration studies at the Cato Institute, told CQ Roll Call on Wednesday that the immigration court backlog — which has already reached more than 1 million cases — will worsen from the postponement of nondetainee cases.

"The waiting times for people who have had petitions approved but haven't been issued their green cards yet will lengthen," he said. "This pushes everything back and we can't get anything done."

Despite the significant impact on the immigration system, local news reports indicate that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents were still carrying out interior enforcement efforts, conducting arrests in communities with COVID-19 clusters.

Instances where ICE arrested individuals at or near medical facilities have also raised concern from lawmakers and advocates, who fear the actions will discourage immigrants from seeking help or learning about the virus.

ICE has maintained it does not conduct enforcement at sensitive locations, such as hospitals, "except under extraordinary circumstances."

In an email sent Tuesday to congressional staffers, ICE said it would suspend in-person "check-ins" that monitor undocumented immigrants considered low priority for deportation. Usually, these check-ins require immigrants to wait in close quarters until their appointment time. ICE also said that immigrants apprehended at the southern border would be allowed to report to the field office 60 days after their release, as opposed to the typical 30 days.

The agency previously canceled social visitation at its detention center. An ICE spokesperson told CQ Roll Call that at least one staffer at a facility in New Jersey had fallen ill, self-quarantined, and was undergoing COVID-19 testing. The agency maintained that no detainee in ICE custody had been confirmed for coronavirus.

