

# Jonathan “Jock” Scharfen

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*By Michael J. Keegan*

## Building an Immigration Service for the 21st Century

As the deputy director of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), Jonathan “Jock” Scharfen serves as the chief operating officer of an organization with an annual budget of roughly \$2 billion, with 250 offices throughout the country and 15,000 employees. USCIS adjudicates benefits requests and petitions for individuals seeking to become citizens of the United States or to study, live, or work in this country. “To give you a sense of the scale of our operations, we end up processing about 6 to 8 million immigration applications a year,” explains Scharfen. On a daily basis alone, USCIS conducts 135,000 security background checks, takes 8,000 fingerprints, and welcomes about 2,100 new citizens to this country.

In a post-9/11 world, USCIS plays an integral role in the national security of the nation. Its mandate is to administer the citizenship and immigration services of the United States: processing all immigrant and most non-immigrant benefits. It is a very challenging mission for an organization that receives no specific federal appropriation. “Most of [our budget is] derived from fees ... not from appropriated monies,” explains Scharfen. About 99 percent of its \$2.6 billion budget request for FY 2008 will be funded through the fees USCIS collects from immigration benefit applications and petitions.

To operate more efficiently and in line with actual operational costs, USCIS has sought to adjust the fees it collects from various petitions and immigration benefit applications. Scharfen underscores that the new fees (which became effective on July 30) will ensure appropriate funding to meet national security requirements, improve customer service, and allow the agency to modernize an outdated infrastructure. According to Scharfen, a number of factors prompted the fee review and a new fee structure. First, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued a report that concluded that the agency’s last major fee restructuring, implemented in 1998, did not fully recover USCIS’s costs. “In other words, we were operating in

### CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- Deputy Director, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), U.S. Department of Homeland Security
- Deputy Staff Director/Chief Counsel, Committee on International Relations, United States House of Representatives
- Chief Counsel, Committee on International Relations, United States House of Representatives
- Deputy Legal Advisor and Director, National Security Council, Executive Office of the President

the red every year because the fee was inadequate to cover our operations, and the GAO recommended that we do a new fee study to make sure that the fees covered operational costs,” notes Scharfen. He also points to the Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990, which began to apply to the Department of Homeland Security in 2004; it requires fee-based agencies to have a fee review every two years. “But really what’s driving this, the reality of this, is that we are not covering our current costs,” declares Scharfen. The previous fee schedule would have generated about \$1.25 billion in revenue, leaving USCIS about \$1 billion short.

Scharfen also notes that the previous fee structure factored into the dramatic increase in application backlogs. “The backlog numbered up to 3.4 million just back in 2004,” says Scharfen. “That backlog was building because we did not have the fees coming in to be able to pay for both the processes and the manpower to work out those applications in a timely fashion.” Also, in the post-9/11 threat environment, USCIS has to follow new security requirements. Scharfen points out that “the last major fee study was back in 1998. So in between the last major study, we had 9/11 and the



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requirement of all these national security measures, and they’re unfunded.”

With the new fee structure, USCIS has the ability to modernize its business infrastructure and build an immigration service for the 21st century. It enables applicants to pay a one-time fee instead of having to pay multiple fees depending on application and status. “One of our major challenges would be the efficient delivery of immigration services. In other words, we’ve got to be good and efficient at the job we do,” says Scharfen. He points out: “Just recently, [USCIS] cleared a 3.4 million application backlog ... it took a lot of energy, leadership, and hard work to dig out from under that backlog.” He envisions avoiding future backlogs and improving services through an agency-wide organizational and business transformation initiative.

In 2006, USCIS refocused its previous modernization efforts and embarked on an effort to transform its business processes and technology to improve customer service and achieve operational efficiency. “The different pieces of our transformation initiative involve digitization, moving from a paper-based system to a computer-based system. It also involves moving to a person-centric process from a form-centric process,” observes Scharfen. “We want to ... have a person-centric system.... That’s more efficient.... Another thing that we want to do with this transformation program is to have our records and our applications put into electronic form.” Shifting USCIS’s current, largely paper-based system, which focuses on forms or application processing, to a system that is completely electronic and that focuses on the actual applicant rather than the application is critical to building an immigration service for the 21st century, according to Scharfen.

USCIS may also face significant increases in workload, which may further burden its operations, should a guest worker program be legislated—as was proposed earlier this year. Scharfen admits “it will not be an insignificant management and leadership challenge.... We’ve been

planning for this day for some time.” He points out that “the administration and USCIS have been working very carefully with the different committees on the Hill to make sure that we’re communicating what’s operationally feasible should an immigration reform bill ultimately become reality.” No matter what, Scharfen recognizes, “it will be a big lift.” Still, he believes that if the challenge comes, it’s one which he’s confident the agency can meet.

Another top challenge for USCIS is managing a fair and equitable immigration system while not compromising public safety and securing the homeland. “We’ve emphasized to our employees that national security is important, and I think that that can’t be overemphasized.... We know that terrorists continue to want to take advantage of our immigration laws, and so we have to remain vigilant to ensure that our people are trained and that they understand the threats that are out there.” For Scharfen, Director Emilio Gonzalez’s leadership has set the right tone. “I think the principles and the mission emphasis made by the director are very important, and people pick up on that. They want to do what the director has laid out, and he has made it very clear that national security is a central goal of his. He likes to say there’s a reason that USCIS is in the Department of Homeland Security—and that’s because of national security.” ■

To learn more about the USCIS, go to [www.uscis.gov](http://www.uscis.gov).



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To read the full transcript of *The Business of Government Hour’s* interview with Jock Scharfen, visit the Center’s website at [www.businessofgovernment.org](http://www.businessofgovernment.org).