

# Alejandro Mayorkas

Director

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

*By Michael J. Keegan*

## Ensuring the Integrity of the U.S. Immigration System



A well-managed modern immigration system is fundamental to maintaining U.S. national security. Whether it is the changing demographics of its customers, fluctuating and unpredictable demand for immigration services, or the rise of new security threats, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) plays an integral role in ensuring the security and integrity of the nation's immigration system.

"Our agency," explains Alejandro

Mayorkas, director of USCIS, "was created as part of the Department of Homeland Security, following the Homeland Security Act of 2002. Our portfolio is really the administration of our country's legal immigration system. We have the responsibility of ensuring the integrity of the system that we administer and safeguarding our national security. It is in this latter function that we fit into the Department of Homeland Security's overarching mission of securing our homeland."

Director Mayorkas pursues this critical mission with 18,000 government employees and contractors working at 250 offices across the world. "Our budget is in excess of just about \$2.4 billion. What many people don't realize is that our primary source of funding is actually the fees that we receive from individuals who apply for immigration benefits," says Mayorkas. To underscore the agency's dependence on fee revenue, Mayorkas notes that of the agency's \$2.4 billion budget, approximately \$260 million comes from appropriated funding. Being a fee-for-services agency makes it even more difficult to manage and fulfill its mission during difficult economic times.

Mayorkas acknowledges that in the last year or two his agency has faced a number of challenges. "We've seen our revenues slip considerably in a climate where it's very difficult to receive increase in appropriated funds or pass cost increases to our customers, who are also suffering in this difficult economic environment." Given the budget realities of today, USCIS needs to do more with less. As a result, USCIS pursued cost-cutting measures to improve operational efficiency and reduce costs. In 2010, Mayorkas notes that the agency cut its budget by approximately \$186 million. "We went through our agency top to bottom [and] made difficult budget cuts to be careful and responsive to today's fiscal environment." He stresses that his agency must be more efficient out of respect for the customers who pay fees and the taxpayers who support its operations. Along with spending reductions and operational efficiencies, he also established a new umbrella management organization within the agency. "I created a management director to oversee a number of mission-critical management and administrative functions."

Challenging times present opportunities to transform. Director Mayorkas has taken the opportunity to emphasize the importance of aligning his agency's operations with a set of guiding principles: integrity, consistency, efficiency, and transparency. "I shaped the guiding principles," explains Mayorkas, "based on my communications with our workforce and the communities we serve." He admits that USCIS needs to do a better job of uniformly and consistently administering immigration laws and regulations. "Our workforce deserves consistency and the communities that we serve deserve consistency. Currently, it may not be necessarily our greatest strength, but we are certainly devoted to achieving it." Efficiency is another principle. "Efficiency is incumbent upon us. As a public service agency, we have



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customers whom we serve. It is so important that we be efficient because we spend customers' money and have to be very careful how we spend that money." Integrity is another guiding principle. "It is not only the integrity of our immigration system, protecting it from those who seek to exploit it, but it also involves the integrity of our workforce. We are guardians of the public trust and, therefore, integrity is of critical importance," declares Mayorkas. The fourth guiding principle dovetails with the Obama administration's focus on transparency. "The president articulated a vision of open government from the moment he set foot in office. We serve the public and have to be held accountable. We have to be transparent with the information we provide and how we conduct our business," notes Mayorkas. He points out that infusing agency operations with these principles will enable it to do more than endure current challenges, but forge a path to excel in the future.

For the agency to excel in the future, modernizing its systems and infrastructure today is crucial. USCIS is currently engaged in an enterprise-wide transformation program aimed at preparing the agency to meet current and future immigration demands. "We are now working on a modernization program that is going to move us from a paper-based system to an electronic environment, which is going to yield tremendous benefits to our customers and to our workforce," explains Mayorkas. He underscores his agency's dedication to redesigning business processes that ensure delivering the most effective and reliable system for the 21st century.

Director Mayorkas also places great stress on improving customer service and stakeholder engagement. "Our customer base is extremely diverse. We have to develop customer service tools for each constituent and that is a challenge. We've redesigned our website, making it more customer-friendly. We've also provided individuals with an ability to track the progress of their cases and even receive text messages when an update occurs." Mayorkas also established the Office of Public Engagement (OPE). OPE

coordinates and directs agency-wide dialogue with external stakeholders. OPE actively collaborates with, and seeks feedback from, stakeholders to inform USCIS policies and priorities. "I think it's one of our crowning achievements to date," declares Mayorkas. "I don't believe a public service agency should govern exclusively by edict. Why don't we collaborate with the public we serve? Why don't we draw upon the expertise of the public that we serve and the experience of the public that we serve in developing our policies and our procedures? I believe in leadership through collaboration and through teamwork."

In fact, Mayorkas describes himself as the chief collaborator within his agency. "I think the obligation of and opportunity for any leader is to bring out the best in people. It is key to provide opportunities and ensure that the potential of staff is being maximized. I think that is the core responsibility of a leader—enabling an agency to play to its strengths and to work on its challenges."

Mayorkas has always had a keen interest in and personal experience with U.S. immigration laws. "I, myself, am a refugee from Cuba. My parents, my sister, and I fled Communist Cuba in 1960, and so the issue of immigration is one that has been very close to me personally. I'm very drawn to the mission of this agency." ■

To learn more about the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 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 Alejandro Mayorkas, visit the Center's website at [www.businessofgovernment.org](http://www.businessofgovernment.org).