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<https://www.wsj.com/articles/with-paperwork-locked-underground-thousands-of-u-s-citizenship-applicants-wait-and-wait-11643025603>

## POLITICS

# With Paperwork Locked Underground, Thousands of U.S. Citizenship Applicants Wait and Wait

Pandemic-fueled restrictions at federal records centers, located in limestone caves, have kept many citizenship applications from being processed

By [Michelle Hackman](#)

Updated Jan. 24, 2022 9:12 am ET

Shawntel Went expected pandemic-related delays when she applied for U.S. citizenship in May 2020. But as months slipped by and friends who had applied for their citizenship after she did were approved, she started to worry.

Finally, earlier this month, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services offered Ms. Went an explanation: The paperwork it needed to complete her application was stuck in one of several government storage facilities known as Federal Records Centers. Those centers, miles-long networks of man-made limestone caves built beneath the Kansas City metro area, were largely closed due to Covid-19 and had no immediate plans to reopen.

Without that paperwork, which contains Ms. Went's complete immigration history since she moved to the U.S. from Barbados in 2011, the citizenship agency can't approve her application.

The government, she said, told her there was no solution. "They don't want to open the office to go and get it," she said. "It doesn't make any sense."

Ms. Went isn't the only one in bureaucratic limbo. As of this month, more than 350,000 requests for immigration histories were pending with the National Archives and Records Administration, which oversees the Federal Records Centers in Kansas City, though not all of those requests were for pending citizenship applications.

In a statement, USCIS acknowledged that a backlog of file requests had occurred because of operating restrictions at the records centers, and said “the agency is in constant communication with NARA to assist them in whatever way is needed, including offering USCIS staff to assist in procuring files.”

The situation has started attracting the attention of some lawmakers, including Rep. Ted Budd (R., N.C.), who wrote a letter to the White House last month asking the administration to reopen the Federal Records Centers at full capacity after he received nine reports of stranded citizenship applications from his North Carolina district.

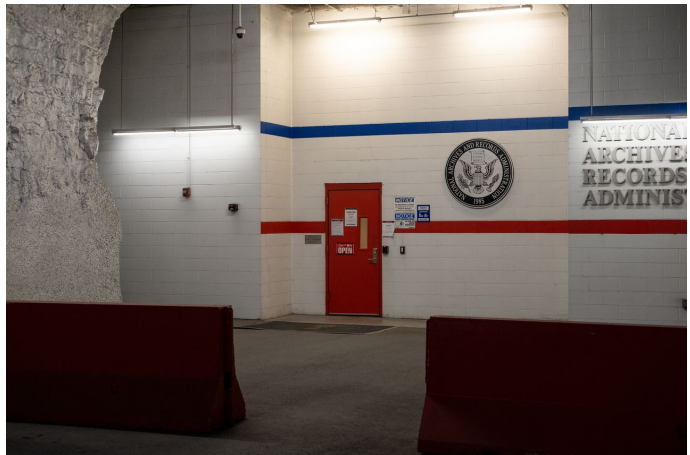
“My overriding question is, what is their plan to get back to normal operations, because this is not normal,” Mr. Budd said in an interview. “Most people have found a way to come back to work by now.”



Much of the paperwork needed to complete citizenship applications is stored in miles-long networks of man-made limestone caves beneath the Kansas City metro area, which were largely closed due to Covid-19.



In a statement, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services acknowledged that a backlog of file requests had occurred because of operating restrictions at the underground records centers.



As of September 2021, more than 350,000 requests for immigration histories were pending with the National Archives and Records Administration.

PHOTOS: FRUHLEIN CHRYS ECONAR/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL(3)

The citizenship logjam is the starkest example of a long-running problem facing the U.S. immigration system: It operates almost entirely on pen and paper. Those files, about 80 million in total, have grown so physically voluminous that the citizenship agency has

contracted out some of its storage to a different federal agency, the National Archives and Records Administration.

That agency is supposed to retrieve files containing applicants' immigration histories. But because of the pandemic, it has closed its facilities to all but emergency cases—and the files needed to approve some people's citizenship applications are out of reach.

After several inquiries from The Wall Street Journal, the National Archives and Records Administration said in a statement that it has kept staff levels at 25% at its Kansas City facility because it is “an area of high transmission.” But last week, the agency said, it began splitting work into two shifts to respond to more requests and allow a small number of staff from the citizenship agency to retrieve their own files. It also urged the citizenship agency to hasten its transition to electronic filing.

“The pandemic has made the need for agencies to change their processes and rely less on paper files to meet their mission even more important,” the agency said in its statement.

Susan Cohen, a Boston-based immigration attorney, first encountered the issue a few months ago. She had filed citizenship applications on behalf of two clients, married doctors from Israel both working at Boston-area hospitals. The couple asked that their names not be used but shared their immigration paperwork with the Journal.

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— Rep. Ted Budd (R., N.C.)

The couple applied on the same day in September 2020 and received biometrics appointments on the same day five months later. Then, several months after that, the husband received an interview while his wife heard nothing. She is still waiting.

“This situation has turned into a Kafkaesque bureaucratic immigration nightmare, and the applicants deserve better,” Ms. Cohen said.

Ms. Cohen called contacts at senior levels of the citizenship agency and learned that the wife's immigration paperwork was being stored at the underground Kansas City facility, though her husband's wasn't. It isn't clear why some records are inaccessible but not others.

Ms. Cohen reached out to other lawyers and soon discovered dozens of citizenship applications caught in a similar quagmire across the country.

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The bureaucratic backups are likely a significant reason why citizenship application-processing times have ballooned during the pandemic, from an average of nine months in 2019 to a year now. Ms. Cohen and other lawyers believe they are only now discovering the issue because applicants aren't permitted to inquire about their cases with the citizenship agency until their cases have exceeded normal processing times, which in Boston can routinely reach 15 months, according to government data.

Ms. Went, who lives in Rhode Island and works as a chef at a hotel in Boston, said she had waited years to apply for her citizenship because the cost—\$725 plus lawyer fees—felt prohibitive. She decided to move ahead in 2020 after she met a volunteer with Project Citizenship, a nonprofit legal aid organization in Boston, at a local public library.

The delay has cost her. In September 2020, Ms. Went's green card expired, and she paid \$455 to renew it. Then, in July of last year, her son turned 18—meaning he could no longer become a citizen through her application and would need to apply, and pay, on his own.

“This is supposed to be one of the most advanced countries in the world,” she said, “but the thing standing in my way is a locked door.”

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## Corrections & Amplifications

More than 350,000 requests for immigration histories were pending with the National Archives and Records Administration as of this month. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said more than 350,000 requests were pending as of September 2021.

(Corrected on Jan. 24)