



This document contains ASISTA's notes from the anniversary engagement. These notes have not been reviewed by USCIS or the Ombudsman and all content is paraphrased from the information provided by USCIS and the Ombudsman.

The CIS Ombudsman's Webinar Series: Engagement with USCIS on the HART Service Center One-Year Anniversary

Date of Engagement: April 30, 2024

Speakers:

Ciro Parascandola, Chief of Public Engagement, CIS Ombudsman
Nathan Stiefel, Acting CIS Ombudsman
Connie Bae, Chief of Staff, OP&S
Jonathan Micale, Acting Director, HART
Laurie Goudge, Acting Deputy Director, HART
Jennifer Mickey, Chief of Staff, HART
Tracey Parsons, Senior Advisor, SCOPS

ASISTA Notes:

USCIS & Ombudsman Presentation

1. Introduction information

- a. We will be covering some of the same information in this session as we covered in HART's March anniversary engagement

ASISTA Note: Our notes from HART's March engagement can be found [here](#) and HART's FAQs can be found [here](#).

- b. We will post a summary and slides on dhs.gov/outreach

ASISTA Note: The Ombudsman has [posted a summary of the webinar and the presentation slides](#) to their website. The Ombudsman will post follow-up Q&A, as well.

2. USCIS Ombudsman

- a. Mission of our office:
 - i. 1) casework services help individuals and employers who need to resolve a huge and unacceptable problem with USCIS
 - ii. 2) provide an ear to the public and engage with a full range of stakeholders invested in the immigration system and identify and assess trends in which individuals and employers have problems with USCIS
 - iii. 3) use information obtained from casework and outreach to research and make recommendations to fix systemic issues in the delivery of immigration benefits and improve quality of services provided by USCIS
 - 1. This culminates in our annual report to Congress each June
- b. Ombudsman is an independent component within DHS, not part of USCIS
 - i. We carry out our mission through adherence to Ombudsman principles of confidentiality, impartiality, and independence
- c. Our paramount goal is to facilitate constructive and collaborative dialogue that has meaningful impact on the immigration process
- d. We commend USCIS on the establishment of HART and recognize that the agency has made significant strides to get it up and running. At the same time, we have received feedback through stakeholder engagements and via casework about certain concerns, such as processing delays. We are here today to hear from USCIS about progress made and also providing insights on how they plan to overcome challenges. USCIS and the Ombudsman are dedicated to continuing to engage with stakeholders to find solutions to these common problems
- e. We will take note of feedback and potentially use it as we develop recommendations we make to USCIS

3. HART Overview

- a. HART is the 6th service center within SCOPS and has been adjudicating since January 29, 2023
 - i. Publicly announced opening 3/30/2023 but have been working since January 29, 2023 to get the HART Service Center up and running
 - ii. We receive support from other service centers for receipt of filings, phys onsite paper-based file exchange, scanning, and other paper-based activities, such as receiving responses of NOIDs or RFEs
 - iii. Will eventually be 100% virtual service center with no geographical location, working across multiple time zones
 - 1. No physical brick & mortar facility or location
 - 2. Until the form types that HART adjudicates are fully digitized, officers must still pick up and drop off their work at physical locations
 - iv. Allocated positions increased from 480 to 481, with the addition of a permanent chief of staff

- b. HART exclusively processes following specific workloads:
 - i. I-360 VAWA
 - ii. I-601A, Application for Provisional Unlawful Presence Waiver
 - iii. I-730, Refugee/Asylee Relative Petition for Follow-to-Join Asylee
 - iv. I-918, Petition for U Nonimmigrant Status – U Visa Bona Fide Determination (BFD)
- c. Ombudsman Question: Will additional form types be added to HART for adjudication?
 - i. Response: We are focused on these four workloads for now that are consolidated in HART and improving efficiency and consistency. Ultimately, the goal is to bring in additional humanitarian and related workloads to HART. But for now, our focus is on building a foundation to establish functions and address backlogs in these four workloads. When HART is fully staffed and we have established processes, we will reevaluate capacity and identify additional workloads we can bring on

4. HART Service Center: Year 1

- a. Staffing – hiring and onboarding new employees is a priority
 - i. January 2023: 150 SCOPS employees reassigned to HART at onset of operations
 - ii. Successfully met FY23 goal of 60-85% staffed and we are on target to reach our ultimate goal of being 95-98% staffed by the end of FY24. HART will likely achieve our goal before our own self-imposed deadline, reflecting the agency’s commitment to ensuring these workloads, that impact some of our most vulnerable populations seeking relief, receive resources needed
 - iii. Fully onboarded 379 employees, with an additional 34 selected employees waiting for their start date (this brings our staffing level to approximately 86%. The remaining 14% are in various stages of the hiring process)
- b. Training – another priority for HART
 - i. 322 employees have completed training related to HART operations, including 251 officers. This includes those permanently assigned to HART, as well as those temporarily detailed to HART in the January-February 2023 timeframe, to assist with workloads before new employees began to onboard
 - 1. A specially trained and dedicated workforce will improve the quality of processing humanitarian caseloads and ensure that our services are helping to stabilize vulnerable populations
 - ii. Some workloads require specialized training, including victimization awareness, domestic violence, special confidentiality protections, vicarious trauma, and statutory and regulatory eligibility requirements

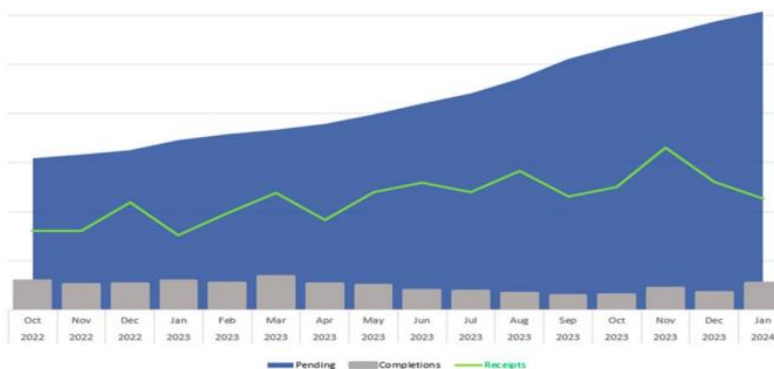
1. While officers may be successfully trained to adjudicate, it's important to keep in mind that it may take several months for officers to become fully proficient after receiving training, depending on the complexity of the work
- iii. Many initial HART Service Center employees were reassigned to HART from other service centers due to their knowledge and experience with the HART Service Center adjudicated form types
 1. They are not only adjudicating cases, but also playing a critical role in helping to coach, train, mentor officers new to USCIS or new to the HART form types. Adjudicating plus playing a key role in training new employees is a huge undertaking but is necessary in building a strong foundation for future work
- iv. Officers new to USCIS must attend and pass Immigration Services Officer BASIC training with the USCIS Academy Training center within their first year of employment
 1. BASIC training is a 27-day training course, designed to help new officers understand roles and responsibilities adjudicating benefit applications and petitions
 2. The curriculum covers public service, immigration law, customer service, fraud and national security, and "other important topics"
- v. 65 HART officers have either completed BASIC training or are currently attending and 53 are scheduled to attend in the next several months
- c. Completions
 - i. While staffing and training were priorities for HART in our first year, we are already seeing some promising preliminary results of adjudicative completions.
 - ii. On track to exceed or have already exceeded our adjudicative completions for all of FY23. We anticipate continued success in this regard as we continue to onboard and train additional staff for the foreseeable future
- d. Processing times
 - i. The current processing time is the amount of time it took for us to complete 80% of adjudicated cases over the last six months. Processing time is defined as the number of days or months that elapse between the date USCIS receives the application, petition, or request and the date USCIS completes that application, petition, or request, that is approves or denies it, in a given 6-month period
 - ii. When we introduced HART last year, we cautioned stakeholders that we didn't anticipate improvement in processing times in our first year because our resources were focused on hiring and training, while also working pending filings

- iii. We also anticipated that our processing times would slip before they got better because the resources used to onboard and train employees are the same resources who adjudicate and support adjudicative functions. These actions, while impacting processing times, were necessary in the first year of HART’s operations to build strong foundation for the future
- iv. While this foundation building was our main focus, we did make modest improvements in our Form I-730 Follow-to-Join Asylee (FTJ-A) workload
- v. It’s important to note that our processing times are really just one part of what goes into measuring our adjudicative progress
- vi. Ombudsman Question: The agency made an announcement on April 3rd that expressed a commitment to reducing processing times and specifically cites several forms under HART’s jurisdiction. Can you explain how you’re addressing these workloads?
 - 1. Response: Our monthly trends graphics is a visual that provides additional context of the work being done at HART. They identify our pending, receipt, and completions data in monthly increments for FY23 and FY24, through January of 2024

5. Monthly Trends

- i. I-360 VAWA

Trends – I-360 VAWA



- This workload requires additional training on the dynamics of domestic violence, special confidentiality protections, vicarious trauma, and statutory and regulatory eligibility requirements.
- Many recent employees to onboard and train have been assigned to Form I-360 VAWA.

ASISTA Note: Larger versions of the graphics can be found in the [presentation slides](#).

1. Admittedly, we have not made much progress here yet but please remember, while our focus was on recruitment, staffing, and training in HART’s first year, we also saw an increase in filings
2. Realistically, we weren’t expecting adjudicative progress until we fully trained officers and they gained proficiency during the first year in this

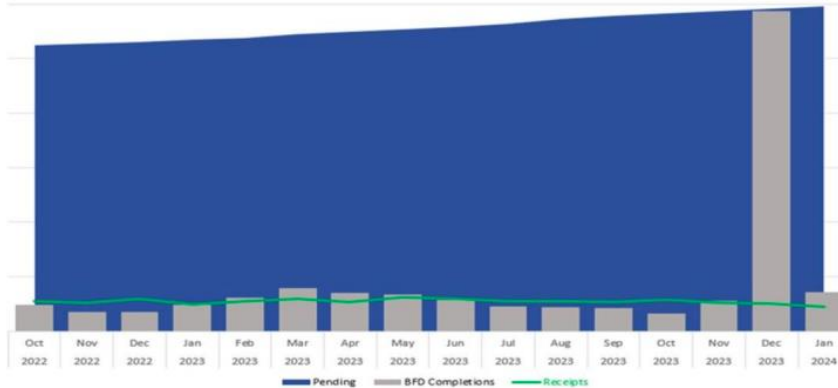
highly specialized workload. This is one of the workloads that requires additional training on the dynamics of domestic violence, special confidentiality protections, vicarious trauma, and statutory and regulatory eligibility requirements

3. There is some good news on this front. Many recent employees to onboard and train have been assigned to Form I-360 VAWA adjudication
 - a. Trained 8 officers on this form type just in February
 - b. Between now and June, we expect to onboard an additional 18 or so officers who will be assigned to and trained on this workload. So we should begin to see progress in this workload as FY24 continues
- ii. I-601A
1. Significant portion of initial new employees were trained on I-601A and this is where we're really starting to see efforts with HART. Due to scanning efforts, this workload is mostly electronic. This has allowed us to train form I-730 HART officers on I-601A and now those officers can adjudicate I-601A when I-730 adjudicative-ready work is minimal
 2. Ability to steadily increase completions has allowed us to start chipping away at backlog each month since September 2023. As officers become more experienced and proficient, we will continue to build progress and anticipate seeing those results thru FY24
- iii. I-730 Follow-to-Join Asylee (FTJ-A)
1. This workload is somewhat complex from an operational perspective because multiple USCIS directorates adjudicate this form
 2. The Texas Service Center (TSC) intakes all Form I-730s for USCIS, HART only adjudicates the FTJ-A workload. HART also expends many hours completing upfront work for the other Form I-730 workloads before transferring to another directorate for adjudication, which is also difficult to explain in a visual. HART data enters FTJ-Refugee workload and immediately shifts those to Refugee, Asylum and International Operations Directorate (RAIO) and pre-processes domestic FTJ-A before shipping them to the Field Office Directorate (FOD)
 3. We wanted to highlight improvements HART made in FTJ-A completions. Thanks to a HART initiative last summer to properly identify which pending cases were within HART's purview to adjudicate, we greatly reduced our backlog of Forms I-730 FTJ-A pending over 90 days. At the end of this initiative, there were only about 500 adjudication-ready cases for our Form I-730 officers, giving us an opportunity to cross-train them in Form I-601A. This flexibility is the result of working from an

electronic environment and allows us to shift to better address both workloads

iv. I-918 BFD

Trends – I-918 U BFD



- I-918 bona fide determination is gaining traction by employing efficiencies to review more petitions.
 1. As you saw with Form I-601A, the I-918 BFD is another workload where HART is gaining traction by employing efficiencies that allow us to review more partitions. Expect promising trend to continue into FY24
 2. Please note, because a BFD is not a final adjudication action, it will not affect or reduce pending cases. Only I-918 approvals can affect pending case numbers and we are limited by statute to 10,000 Form I-918 principal approval per fiscal year
 3. However, improvements in BFD completions helps stabilize pending petitioners by providing them with employment authorization and deferred action while they await final adjudication

Q&A Portion

Pre-Submitted Questions

1. **Question:** HART is a virtual center, but in the March 27th engagement, the agency said it has used some physical locations for file transfer and similar activities. What impact does that have, if any, on adjudication processes and timelines? When do you anticipate that the center will be fully remote?
 - a. **Response:** HART currently partners with existing service centers for supportive functions, like receipt of filings, physical onsite paper-based file exchange,

scanning and other paper-based activities, such as NOID or RFE responses. We will become more operationally robust with physical locations not as critical in terms of workload management. Doing so allows us to more readily shift resources to meet demanding, competing, and ever-changing priorities to improve efficiency of processes and timelines. Ultimately, the goal is to become a fully remote service center with no paper-based adjudications. SCOPS has prioritized digitization of all HART workloads. But at this time, we are not fully remote and continue to rely on other service centers for support. We don't have an anticipated date for when HART will become fully remote, but we will continue to share that information as it becomes available and in future engagements.

2. **Question:** While HART has sole jurisdiction over certain form types, it seems no processing times are listed for HART on the website. When will USCIS identify processing times for the HART form types that are currently posted elsewhere?
 - a. **Response:** HART processing times are now available on the USCIS website. After selecting the form and form category, select “all service centers” and then click “get processing time.” Below the processing times, you will see note that HART is the only service center processing that form type
3. **Questions:** What benefits does USCIS gain from having a virtual center? How does the agency hope to capitalize on these benefits?
 - a. **Response:** The creation of HART aligns closely with USCIS’ strategic plan for FY 2023-26. Specifically, HART aligns with goals 1 and 3 of the strategic plan. Goal 1 is to strengthen the US legal immigration system and HART does that by promoting quality adjudications while reducing processing times and increasing our capacity to respond to our ever-growing humanitarian mission. Goal 3 is to promote effective and efficient management and stewardship. HART does this by enhancing the agency’s capability to efficiently process humanitarian caseloads. Digitization of this workload will improve officer’s timeliness and secure access to data for case processing.
 - b. HART is identified by the work we adjudicate, not by a physical brick and mortar location. As HART is stood up, we will process both online- and paper-based cases. We will continue to partner with existing service centers to support in receipt of filings, physical onsite paper-based file exchange, scanning and other paper-based activities, such as NOID or RFE responses.
 - c. HART will first exist as a hybrid service center and will transition to a 100% virtual service center. We will transition from paper-based to fully digitized with no physical location and will be working across multiple time zones. There are significant cost savings in reducing our physical footprint because there are no file

storage or space requirements needed to house employees. For now, and in general, officers must still pick up and drop off work at physical locations.

- d. Additionally, a specially trained and dedicated workforce will improve the quality of processing humanitarian workloads to ensure services are helping stabilize vulnerable populations and reunite families. HART's focused and specialized staff will result in operational efficiencies with a consistent approach to these adjudicative and support functions.
4. **Question:** With all the onboarding, how do you successfully train while minimizing the impact on processing times?
 - a. **Response:** We went into this knowing processing times were going to be negatively impacted because the staff who onboard and train new employees are the same staff who adjudicate and support operations. One way we're able to minimize the impact on processing time, was to reassign existing officers already assigned at other service centers and already adjudicating HART form types when we first established HART so they could hit the ground running. As we pivoted to recruitment and hiring efforts, they were able to get a head start on adjudicating before being asked to help train new employees who onboarded later.
 - b. We also have had an aggressive hiring and onboarding strategy that allowed us to minimize the training timeframe and maximize resources by training, mentoring, and coaching more than just a few officers at a time and over multiple sessions. All these efforts have hopefully put us in a very good position for FY25 in terms of completions and processing times as new officers complete training and become proficient in these workloads.
 5. **Question:** Is there a dedicated phone line or email where external stakeholders can directly contact HART?
 - a. **Response:** There's definitely no dedicated phone line – most USCIS offices don't have those anymore. Also, HART doesn't have an email address for external stakeholders to directly contact HART. This was by design, so HART resources can focus on adjudication. Stakeholders can use existing channels for contact and inquiry purposes – visit the [USCIS website](#) for more information
 6. **Question:** Has HART assumed responsibility for managing the email boxes dedicated to those protected under 8 USC 1367 confidentiality protections? If not, when will those be transferred from NSC/VSC to HART?
 - a. **Response:** No, HART has not assumed responsibility for managing inboxes dedicated to those protected under 8 USC 1367 and we don't foresee the email

boxes being transferred from VSC or NSC any time soon. Managing email boxes is very resource intensive and the HART workforce is focused on adjudicative operations. VSC and NSC already have resources that manage these accounts and they will reach out to HART, as needed, to resolve any inquiries related to its workload. Also, keep in mind that VSC and NSC still adjudicate I-918 cap and waitlist workloads and I-914s, so transferring email boxes to HART is not a viable solution.

7. **Question:** What is the most efficient way to ensure an address is updated in a timely manner for those with pending cases at HART?
 - a. **Response:** The USCIS website has information on how protected individuals can change their address. Visit the page: “[Change of Address Procedures for VAWA/T/U/Cases and Form I-751 Abuse Waivers](#)”
8. **Question:** Any tips for an attorney that is new to a pending case and wants to follow-up with USCIS on a client’s case?
 - a. **Response:** Depending on the form type, attorneys and accredited representatives can contact email inboxes maintained by VSC and NSC for workloads that HART is adjudicating.
 - b. *Shared by speakers in the chat:*
 - i. For U nonimmigrant petitions and U-based adjustment of status applications located at the Nebraska Service Center (receipt number begins with LIN), email nsc.i-918inquiries@uscis.dhs.gov.
 - ii. For U nonimmigrant petitions and U-based adjustment of status applications located at the Vermont Service Center (receipt number begins with EAC), and for all T nonimmigrant applications and T-based adjustment of status applications, email hotlinefollowupi918i914.vsc@uscis.dhs.gov.
 - iii. For all VAWA Form I-360 self-petitions and related forms, email hotlinefollowupi360.vsc@uscis.dhs.gov

Live Questions

9. **Question:** Who can we reach out to when we haven't received a receipt notice for a U visa case months after a case was mailed to USCIS?

- a. **Response:** Attorneys and accredited representatives can contact USCIS on non-receipt through the same USCIS email box accounts that were just mentioned and are maintained at VSC and NSC. You would use the email address for the service center to which you mailed your application. These are the same email accounts that we've been using for years.
- b. **Ombudsman Response:** We have a case assistance program. For receipt notice delays on an I-918, you can submit DHS Form 7001, available on our website. Upload a full copy of the filing, proof of delivery, and evidence that you reached out to USCIS before reaching out to us. See information on the Ombudsman website about submitting a case assistance request.

ASISTA Note: The Ombudsman case assistance website can be found [here](#). The Ombudsman has also recently updated the [DHS Form 7001, Request for Case Assistance and their Tip Sheet for submitting a request for case assistance](#).

10. **Question:** There appears to be a discrepancy between posted processing times for the service center and actual processing times. This also results in inability to place service requests. How do you plan to address this discrepancy and display information that's a bit more accurate? For example, I-730s are currently listed at 12 months, but cases pending for over four years don't have the ability to submit service requests.
 - a. **Response:** The thing to understand is that there will be outliers. There will be cases not adjudication-ready for whatever reason. That may explain why you have a case waiting for four years. It's important to remember that the current processing time is the amount of work it takes us to complete 80% of adjudicative cases over the last six months. so there are possible outliers. Processing time is defined as the number of days or months that have elapsed between the date USCIS received the application, petition, or request and the date USCIS completed the application, petition, or request (either approved or denied) within a six-month period.
11. **Question:** How can we ask case-specific questions about forms being adjudicated by the HART Service Center?
 - a. **Response:** USCIS is in the process of improving systems to make customer service more accessible to 8 USC 1367-protected individuals, whose cases are included in HART's workload and the agency will be providing more information to stakeholders in coming weeks. Make sure you're registered for alerts and updates. You can visit the USCIS alerts webpage to do this. We welcome feedback from those attending today on how we can improve customer service access for 8 USC 1367-protected individuals. The transition to HART does not affect existing customer service channels.

12. **Question:** Will HART put out filing tips for the form types you adjudicate, considering that the adjudications are virtual?
- a. **Response:** Though HART is a virtual-based service center, a lot of filings are still paper-based. So we recommend organizing your filings based on tips for filing forms by mail on the USCIS website. Plus, each form webpage has a checklist for required individual evidence. The filing processes for these form types have not changed because HART was created.
- ASISTA Note: USCIS tips for filing by mail can be found [here](#).*
13. **Question:** How can we get in touch with HART about suggestions on your culturally-sensitive trainings?
- a. **Response:** The USCIS workforce, which includes HART adjudicators, regularly receive specialized training to ensure cohesive and consistent adjudications of these forms. In addition to form type training, officers receive 8 USC 1367 protections training, victimization awareness training, and vicarious trauma training, as required and appropriate for these sensitive workloads. We value input from stakeholders who have experienced building trust with the communities we serve. We appreciate offers from experts and the advocacy community to discuss these trainings. We look forward to engaging further on this topic to ensure trainings are as comprehensive and culturally sensitive as possible. If you have feedback or suggestions, email public.engagement@uscis.dhs.gov.

Closing Statement

1. Being transparent internally with employees and externally with stakeholders is critical to our success. Communications have been robust and we look forward to more this fiscal year. We have supported over two dozen internal and external engagements this past year related to the standing up of the HART Service Center, which includes quarterly national engagements. This has allowed us to reach approximately 1,450 individuals – this doesn't include T/U/VAWA engagements that HART also supports. We will continue to support the HART Service Center national engagements and other opportunities like this joint webinar we're doing with the CIS Ombudsman.