

**Op-ed in Chicago Sun-Times "Masses yearn for courtesy" by Representative Jan Schakowsky**

**Anyone in the South Loop on a weekday morning notices the long line of people that starts at 10 W. Jackson, the district headquarters of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. The line, which snakes around the building and around the corner, is the most visual example of an agency whose culture is "the customer is always wrong."**

**The hundreds of people in line are indeed customers. They pay handsomely for every service -- \$ 225 to be eligible for naturalization, for example, up from \$ 95 in January -- not including the cost of fingerprints, photos, transportation or time off from work. The cost of aggravation is incalculable.□□**

**I visited the line July 7. The stories of those in line made me so angry I vowed to force serious changes. Every person had his or her own horror story. Some had been waiting since 5 a.m. to be among the 600 who would be served that day. Many waited for hours simply to get a form, never told that forms were available on the Internet or by phone. Others were spending their second or third consecutive day in line.**

**I met a 12-year-old girl whose green card said she was born in 1937 instead of 1987. Clearly, this was a mistake made by an INS employee. Instead of receiving an apology, the family was ordered to submit a new application, pay more fees and stand in more lines. She was one of many there because of an INS mistake.**

**About 10:30 a.m., an INS officer came out, the first I had seen since arriving at 8 a.m., and told the hundreds still waiting that the doors were shut and no one else would be taken that day. She then barked at me to "move or go to jail." After I took exception to this treatment, she told me she treats everyone that way.**

**As people left, some in utter disbelief, they were given a piece of paper with phone numbers and told they could get their questions answered on the telephone instead of waiting in line. Why wasn't that paper distributed at 7:30 a.m.? Because "people wouldn't leave anyway," I was told condescendingly by the officer. "Besides," she added, "many of these people have tried those numbers and they haven't worked for them."**

**In the six months that I have been a member of Congress, hundreds of people have come to my office seeking help. About 90 percent are experiencing problems with the INS. I represent one of the most diverse congressional districts in the country. What they have in common is a love of the United States -- and a fear and loathing of the INS.**

**Like many Chicagoans, I am a first-generation American. Chicago is a city of immigrants that revels in its diversity. How shameful that new residents, many of whom faced persecution in their home countries and took great risks and made great sacrifices to come to the "land of the free," are treated with astonishing disrespect by the very agency**

mandated to help them become American citizens.

I've met with Doris Meissner, head of INS. I've met with Brian Perryman, the Chicago District director. Now I want action. I want to hear the plan for eliminating the line. I want to see INS officials walking the line, answering questions in a respectful way. There should be convenient places to get forms without waiting. I want staff trained to provide accurate information in a customer-friendly environment. I want information distributed in a timely fashion. Once people get in the door, I want to see more staff to serve them, considering that fees were raised and the budget increased for precisely that purpose. Above all, I want a commitment that the culture of the INS will change and soon.

The line is the tip of the iceberg. I also am looking into the way in which people who are seeking asylum are treated, the way that the citizenship test is administered, and the arbitrary manner in which disability waivers are granted. Some of the INS issues must be addressed through legislative changes. But the line is not one of them. You cannot legislate respect, but as a new member of Congress, I will not rest until my immigrant constituents get some.