

Immigrant complaints draw Durbin's support for INS bill

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The horror stories roll into U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin's office every day.

Hundreds of calls--about 85 percent of all the calls that come in--come from immigrants reporting problems with the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Some say they have to wait years for citizenship applications to be processed. Others complain about poor treatment from officials.

With that in mind, Durbin on Monday announced his support for legislation pending in Congress to create the position of ombudsman for the Immigration and Naturalization Services.

"For too long, the INS has been the worst bureaucracy in Washington--lost files, unconscionable delays, voice mail hell and lack of basic courtesy," the Illinois Democrat said. "An ombudsman will give those using INS an advocate with clout."

"The ombudsman would bridge the gap between INS and the people it serves."

Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.) introduced the bill that would create the new position and expects it will be incorporated into legislation to create the new Homeland Security Department. A similar ordinance is pending in the House of Representatives.

"There needs to be a place where people can go to file complaints if all other methods have failed them," said Rep. Jan Schakowsky, who introduced the legislation in the House.

The ombudsman would be appointed by the president for a five-year stint. He would back recommendations to the INS and investigate claims of incompetence or inaction. The person would have unrestricted access to government documents and could be fired only by a legislative process arising from mismanagement of the office or illegal activities.

The ombudsman would assist the public in resolving individual cases, identifying systematic problems within the agency and proposing solutions to those problems.

Local activists said the move will prove to be a huge benefit for 1.5 million immigrants who call the Chicago area home.

"This is going to make the INS more effective and more inclusive of the needs of its clients,"

said Wamaid Mesty-Borges, of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund.

Abass Wane watched as his brother waited eight years to get his citizenship approved after moving to the United States from Mauritania. He became a citizen two days ago.

"It is ridiculous and unacceptable," Wane said.

Officials at INS acknowledge they need to have someone available for the public but say the claims of waiting years to get citizenship applications processed are exaggerated. The average process time in the United States is about eight months, INS officials said.