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United States General Accounting Office 132988

**Fact Sheet for the Honorable
Edward R. Roybal,
House of Representatives**

May 1987

IMMIGRATION

How INS' Los Angeles District Office Responds to Enquiries

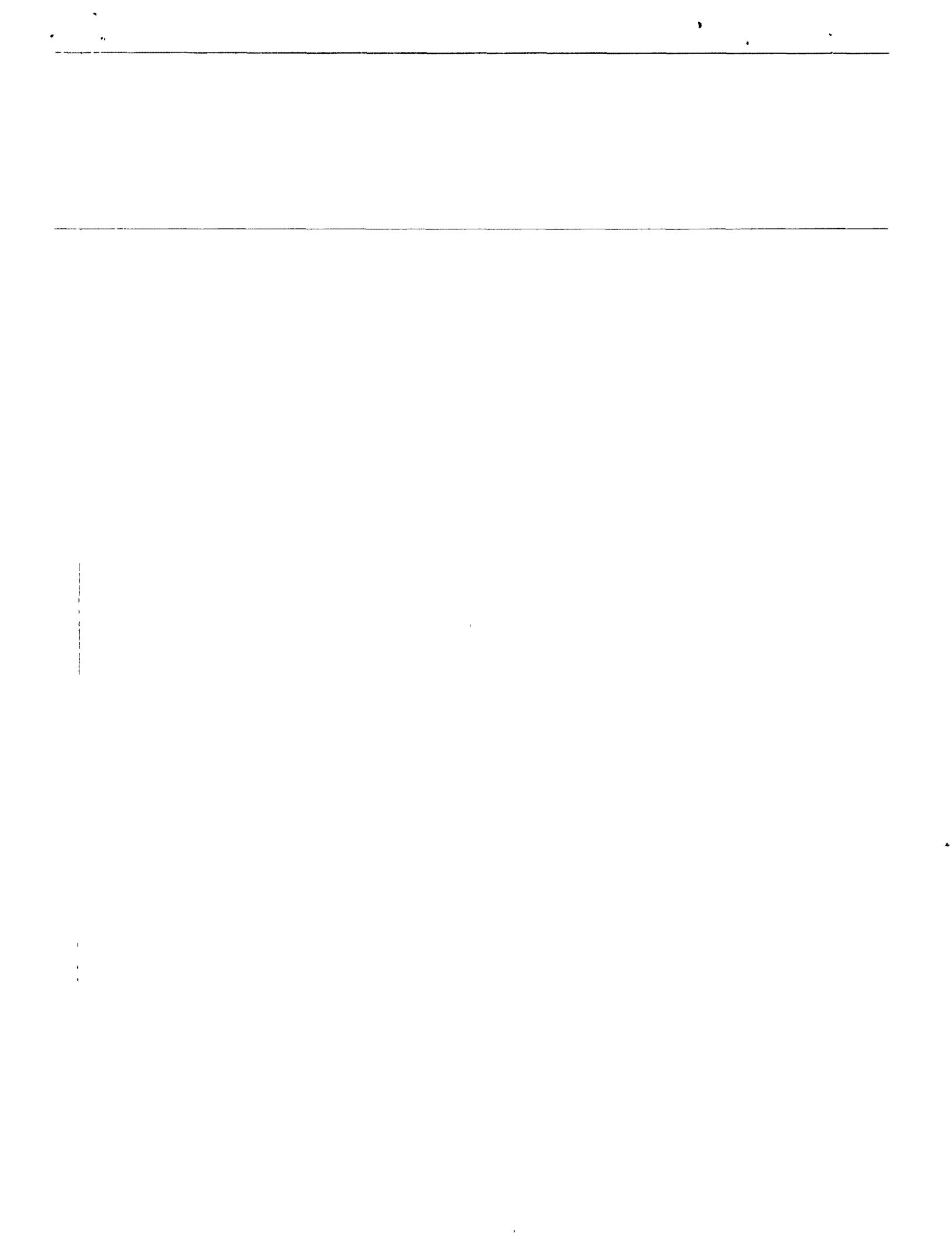


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United States
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May 12, 1987

The Honorable Edward R. Roybal
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Roybal:

In September 1986, you requested that we obtain information on how the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) Los Angeles District Office (LADO) responds to congressional and public inquiries. Specifically, you asked us how LADO's staff (1) handles such inquiries, (2) responds to a multilingual population, and (3) interfaces with the public and organizations which provide assistance to the alien population. In addition, you requested information on internal evaluations of LADO, the initiatives being undertaken to improve its responses to inquiries, and budget-related data.

On December 4, 1986, we briefed your staff on information we had been given by INS on how the district office operates. As agreed with your office we did not verify the information obtained and presented here. As requested, this fact sheet summarizes and supplements the information presented at that briefing.

According to INS, LADO responds on average to 1,223 congressional inquiries each month through its Congressional Liaison Office. To improve its rate of response, LADO has initiated a schedule of regular meetings with representatives of each member of the Los Angeles congressional delegation to discuss outstanding requests.

In fiscal year 1986, LADO received over 330,000 in-person inquiries and 360,000 telephone inquiries. As of October 1986, it had a backlog of 2,000. LADO has adopted a telephone answering system which provides pre-recorded information in Spanish as well as in English and the self-service area in its reception room provides printed information in both languages.

In the reception area, individuals needing assistance are provided with a color-coded ticket to distinguish the type of assistance they require. The tickets are distributed based on availability of LADO staff to respond to the inquiries. Tickets are usually handed out within 1-to-3 hours after the office opens. In December 1986, LADO implemented a system whereby appointments are scheduled for those individuals still in line after all available tickets have been handed out.

The majority of LADO's information staff of 30 speaks another language in addition to English. The staff is comprised of 16 Blacks, 5 Hispanics, 5 Caucasians, 3 Asian-Americans, and 1 American Indian.

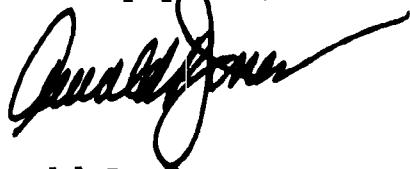
For its staff who deal with the public, there are a variety of courses including a 3-week course on immigration law and procedures and a 2-week course on topics like stress management, cross-cultural awareness, and legal matters pertaining to INS. LADO also provides training on INS' operating procedures to members of organizations that provide support to the alien population.

In order to improve its telephone center, INS has made technical changes to reduce a constant ringing problem and has introduced music for callers placed on hold. It is also modernizing its telephone answering capabilities to allow callers to obtain general information via the telephone without the need for personal assistance.

To obtain this information, we met with INS officials at their headquarters and Los Angeles offices. We discussed this fact sheet with INS officials who agreed with its contents, and we incorporated their suggestions where appropriate. Details on the above issues and budget-related data along with our objectives, scope, and methodology are contained in the appendix.

As arranged with your office, unless you publicly announce the contents of the report earlier, we plan no further distribution until 7 days from its date of issuance. At that time we will make copies available to the Attorney General, INS, and interested parties who request them. If you have any questions regarding the contents of this document, please call me on (202) 275-8389.

Sincerely yours,



Arnold P. Jones
Senior Associate Director

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| <u>ABBREVIATIONS</u> | | |
| DOJ | Department of Justice | |
| FOIA/PA | Freedom of Information and Privacy Acts | |
| INS | Immigration and Naturalization Service | |
| LADO | Los Angeles District Office | |

INS' LOS ANGELES DISTRICT OFFICERESPONSES TO INQUIRIESOBJECTIVES, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

At the request of Congressman Roybal, we collected information on the Department of Justice's (DOJ) Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) Los Angeles District Office (LADO) handling of information requests. Specifically, we requested data from INS regarding LADO on (1) the staffing used to respond to congressional inquiries, (2) the workload and backlog of cases related to information requests, (3) its ability to respond to multilingual information inquiries, (4) its response to public inquiries, (5) staff composition by race and foreign language capability, and the training of such staff, and (6) its use of organizations that provide assistance to the alien population. In addition, you requested information on efforts to improve service to the public, internal evaluations of the office, and budget data on INS' information and records management program.

To obtain this information we met with INS officials in its headquarters office and at LADO. We collected our information from LADO except for data collected from the INS western region which has a bearing on the district's operations. The information was obtained during the period September 1986 through March 1987 but, as agreed with your office, was not verified.

RESPONDING TO CONGRESSIONAL INQUIRIES

Inquiries from members of Congress go through LADO's Congressional Liaison Office. About 90 percent of the inquiries relate to naturalization cases and involve finding alien files and determining additional paperwork needed to resolve an alien's application. Four people are assigned from the examination unit --two examiners, a staff assistant and a special assistant to the district director. From April through September 1986, the office responded to 7,337 inquiries which on average is 1,223 a month.

In April 1986, LADO initiated a schedule of regular meetings at about 60-day intervals, with representatives of each member of the Los Angeles area congressional delegation in order to discuss the status of outstanding requests.

WORKLOAD AND BACKLOG DATA

During fiscal year 1986, the information office received over 330,000 in-person inquiries and 360,000 telephone inquiries.

The district had a backlog of 2,000 inquiries, as of October 1986. Statistics are not available on the number of persons who (1) could not be assisted at any given time, (2) could not afford the time and expense of visiting the office in-person, or (3) received a busy signal when calling the information office. According to INS officials, the agency requested the phone company, in January 1987, to determine and report on the number of calls receiving a busy signal.

PROVIDING INFORMATION TO A MULTILINGUAL POPULATION

To respond to requests for information, LADO has a telephone answering system and a reception room where instructions can be provided. Telephone inquiries are answered at the INS Western Telephone Service Center which services LADO. The Center's tape librarians provide pre-recorded messages in both English and Spanish. Also, half of the Center's employees speak fluent Spanish.

The district office has a self-service area in the reception room where printed information and instructions can be obtained in both English and Spanish. The area has video displays which provide instructions on commonly used INS forms and a direct telephone line for information on specific subjects. In addition, many of INS's forms are in both English and Spanish.

RESPONDING TO PUBLIC INQUIRIES

Visitors are greeted at LADO's reception entrance by a contact representative¹ who determines the reason for the visit. If they require information not available in the self-service area or have come to file an application, they are presented a color-coded ticket and asked to have a seat in the related color-coded area of the waiting room. The coded tickets are used to distinguish what type of assistance is required such as petition to immigrate relatives, adjustments to permanent alien status, replacement of permanent resident cards, or general information.

Tickets are distributed according to availability of LADO personnel to respond to the inquiries and to estimates of the time needed to process the various applications and forms. All available tickets are usually handed out within 1-to-3 hours after the office opens. When a person's number is called over a public address system, he or she is interviewed/assisted by a contact representative at a partitioned off counter to provide privacy and to muffle noise. Processing time varies among the

¹In March 1987, the title of contact representative was changed to "immigration information officer."

four categories from a few minutes to 30 minutes. In certain instances, applications can be processed on the same day. For example, persons who have an emergency and need to leave the country can obtain a re-entry permit on the same day.

In December 1986, LADO implemented a system whereby appointments can be scheduled for those individuals still in line after all available tickets have been handed out. It also plans to schedule appointments by phone in early 1987, and the district is considering opening on Saturdays or staying open later during weekdays to provide extended periods of public service. In addition, INS officials said that they have initiated a study to identify and analyze the factors which contribute to long queues at selected district offices, including the Los Angeles Office.

INFORMATION STAFF COMPOSITION

LADO has 36 authorized positions to respond to public inquiries--4 supervisors, 1 clerk, 27 contact representatives, and 4 Freedom of Information Specialists. As of October 1986, there were 30 assigned and 6 vacancies (2 supervisors, 1 clerk, and 3 contact representatives). In addition to English, most of the 30 staff members speak other languages (see table I.1).

Table I.1

Staff Language Capabilities

| <u>Number of Staff^a</u> | <u>Language Fluency</u> |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 13 | Spanish |
| 3 | Tagalog |
| 3 | French |
| 1 | Korean |
| 1 | German |
| 1 | Italian |

^aSome staff speak more than one language.

Of the 30 persons 16 are Blacks, 5 are Hispanics, 5 are Caucasians, 3 are Asian-American, and 1 is an American Indian.²

²As of October 1986, the total LADO staff of 534 was comprised of 141 Blacks, 118 Hispanics, 216 Caucasians, 55 Asian-Americans, and 4 American Indians.

TRAINING GIVEN TO CONTACT REPRESENTATIVES

INS provides a number of training courses for its contact representatives. First, all contact representatives attend a 3-week course in Glynco, Georgia, to learn immigration law and procedures. INS also provides a 2-week advanced course for senior contact representatives on such topics as stress management, cross cultural awareness, and legal matters which affect INS. In addition, this year INS will be initiating a 2-week training course for its supervisory representatives which includes motivating subordinates, providing better services to the public, and carrying out administrative requirements. Representatives also complete a separate course entitled "How to Service the Public Better" and are helped to learn Spanish through the use of INS tapes. Also, the INS Commissioner's series of video tapes on new developments within the agency are available for their viewing.

USE OF SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS

The district office meets with organizations that provide support to the alien population. Monthly meetings are held with immigration lawyers and periodically with voluntary service organizations (e.g., churches) that file forms on behalf of aliens. During these meetings, INS discusses recent changes in operating procedures. Organizations are provided instructional material to assist aliens in filing INS applications, petitions, and other forms. In addition, organizations can discuss any topic during these meetings. They can also call INS to discuss unusual problems.

Members of support organizations are provided training on INS' operating procedures, usually a 1-day training course, each year. Also, several 1-day courses on the implementation of the new immigration law--Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986--are being planned.

TELEPHONE SERVICE IMPROVEMENTS

A March 1986 headquarters study of the Western Telephone Service Center which services LADO, examined staffing, equipment maintenance, office management, telephone lines, budget, and complaints and operating statistics. The study identified a number of problems with the Center's operations such as difficulties in retaining staff and operating the telephone system. For example, in some cases callers heard a constant ringing instead of a busy signal. In other cases pre-recorded message lines were full during peak hours which prohibited tape librarians from transferring calls and, since no music was played while a person was on hold, callers would get the impression that they had been disconnected. INS has since made technical changes

to reduce the constant ringing problem and music is played for callers who are placed on hold. LADO is reviewing the study and deciding what additional action to take.

In addition, a new automated telephone answering system which has been tested and installed in INS' San Jose office will be installed at LADO. The system enables caller access to general information via the telephone without the need for personnel assistance, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It should reduce the number of people seeking in-person contacts as well as eliminate the need for tape librarian positions. INS expects to convert the tape librarian positions to contact representative positions which should increase the amount of assistance provided to the visiting public.

Where possible, LADO plans to use a private contractor to transcribe taped telephone messages requesting forms, and to send such forms to the public by mail as rapidly as possible.

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS

Reception rooms are being remodeled to provide pleasant surroundings for both the public and employees and to facilitate traffic flow through these rooms. Emphasis is being placed on using correct signs in Spanish and English and using international symbols to direct the public to specific areas for information.

Methods being pursued to reduce the waiting time for assistance include allowing the public to make appointments by telephone, opening on Saturdays, and extending weekday office hours.

INS' INFORMATION AND RECORDS MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

The Information and Records Management Program is an INS support activity comprised of the following services at the district offices and headquarters:

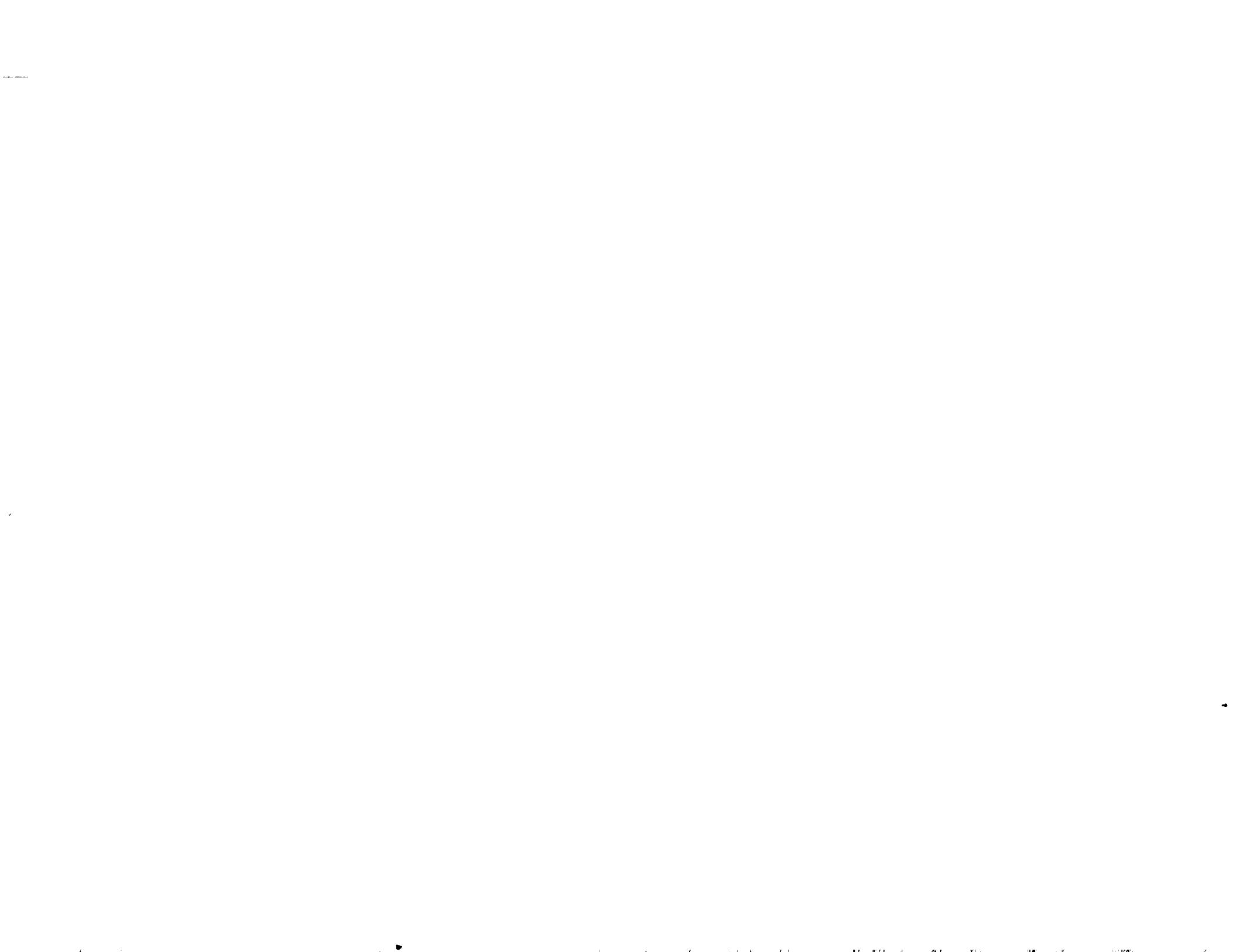
- Information Services handles all inquiries received by telephone, in person, and in writing from the public.
- Records provides for the control and access to INS records by INS operating components.
- Freedom of Information and Privacy Acts (FOIA/PA) handles requests such as those for information contained in INS records.
- Statistics tabulates and analyzes statistical data related to the characteristics and status of aliens.

The INS budget for the program's resources and positions (see table I.2) is not broken down by district offices.

Table I.2
Budget-related Data for INS' Information
and Records Management Program

| <u>Resources</u> | <u>FY 84 (\$000)</u> | <u>FY 85 (\$000)</u> | <u>FY 86 (\$000)</u> |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| DOJ Budget Request | 43,644 | 38,957 | 32,328 |
| Office of Management and Budget Request | 41,305 | 36,918 | 37,566 |
| Enacted by Congress | 35,733 | 37,200 | 35,627 |
| Obligated | 33,201 | 35,241 | 33,694 |
| | | | |
| <u>Positions</u> | <u>FY 84</u> | <u>FY 85</u> | <u>FY 86</u> |
| Information Services | 363 | 374 | 340 |
| Records | 840 | 839 | 794 |
| FOIA/PA | - | 22 | 22 |
| Statistics | <u>45</u> | <u>45</u> | <u>41</u> |
| Total Positions | 1,248 | 1,280 | 1,197 |
| | <u>=====</u> | <u>=====</u> | <u>=====</u> |

Source: INS



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