

Highlights of [GAO-10-865](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

From September 2001 to March 2009, approximately 47,000 noncitizen members of the U.S. military became naturalized U.S. citizens. The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) and the Department of Defense (DOD) have taken steps to assist noncitizens with applying for naturalization. The Kendall Frederick Citizenship Assistance Act (Kendall Frederick Act) and the Military Personnel Citizenship Processing Act (MPCPA), enacted in 2008 to expedite application processing, each directed GAO to report on implementation of the acts. This report addresses (1) the extent to which USCIS met the processing deadlines established in the acts and (2) actions USCIS has taken to expedite the processing of applications, and any challenges it has faced. GAO reviewed relevant legislation and DHS reports and guidance related to processing applications; reviewed several generalizable samples of applicants' case files (A-files); and interviewed USCIS officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the USCIS Director ensure that available deployment information is collected from all applicants when they file the application; case files document that applicants were notified of processing delays and provided an estimated adjudication date; and case files document actions taken when a case is administratively closed or denied. DHS concurred with GAO's recommendations.

[View GAO-10-865 or key components.](#)
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MILITARY NATURALIZATIONS

USCIS Generally Met Mandated Processing Deadlines, but Processing Applicants Deployed Overseas Is a Challenge

What GAO Found

USCIS complied in nearly all cases with the Kendall Frederick Act's requirement that it complete application processing for overseas service members within 6 months of the final background check. USCIS complied in an estimated 73 percent of service member cases and 84 percent of spousal cases with the MPCPA's requirement that it either complete application processing within 6 months of receipt or notify the applicant of the reason for the delay and provide an estimated adjudication date. For the remaining cases, the applicants' files did not document that the applicant was notified that the application would not be processed within 6 months, did not provide an estimated adjudication date in the notification of delay letter, or GAO could not determine if USCIS met the notification requirements because cases pending after July 28, 2009, were not included in GAO's probability samples. Without documentation of USCIS's actions, it is difficult for USCIS to determine its adherence to MPCPA's requirements.

USCIS took several actions to expedite application processing, including establishing a military naturalization unit and using videoconferencing for overseas applicants in war zones, among others; but receiving incomplete applications, processing applicants stationed overseas, and identifying all applicants prior to their overseas deployment pose challenges to timely processing of applications. USCIS cannot identify all deploying service members because it does not have procedures for ensuring that available deployment information is collected from all applicants when they file the application, and this could result in processing delays. Additionally, not all A-files contained documentation indicating that USCIS had taken steps to locate or notify applicants, as required in its April 2009 guidance. For example, for 9 of 15 cases that were administratively closed because the applicant had failed to appear for the initial interview, no documentation was included in the A-file, as required by USCIS's guidance, that a USCIS liaison at the applicant's military installation was contacted in an attempt to locate the service member. Without documenting all actions taken, it is difficult for USCIS to determine the extent to which it is administratively closing or denying cases in accordance with its guidance.

Service Members Who Became U.S. Citizens during a Naturalization Ceremony Held at the Al Faw Palace in Baghdad, Iraq.



Source: Department of Defense.