

US disbands immigration helpdesk that aided H-1B and green card applicants

SECTIONS

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Synopsis

The Trump administration has dismantled the CIS Ombudsman office, which aided immigrants in navigating visa complexities and resolving issues. This decision has raised concerns about reduced transparency within USCIS and the lack of support for thousands of visa holders, green card applicants, and international students.



In a recent move, the Trump administration has shut down the Office of the Citizenship and Immigration Services (CIS) Ombudsman, a key oversight body that had assisted thousands of immigrants in navigating complex visa-related issues. Immigration lawyers have raised concerns, saying this decision will directly affect [H-1B visa](#) holders, international students on F-1 visas, and [green card applicants](#) — with many from the Indian diaspora.

The Ombudsman's office handled nearly 30,000 requests last year, offering help with delays, errors, and application disputes, according to the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA). Immigration attorneys say the closure will reduce transparency and accountability within the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).


"Individuals or businesses sought assistance from the [CIS Ombudsman](#) for a variety of issues, ranging from erroneous rejections of filings and denials to typographical errors on secure documents (such as Green Cards and Employment Authorization Documents) and even mailing issues. Last year, the Ombudsman's office assisted approximately 30,000 applicants," Sharvari Dalal-Dheini, senior director for government relations at AILA, told TOI's Lubna Kably.

Rajiv S Khanna, an immigration attorney based in Arlington, explained that visa holders often turned to the Ombudsman when their legal status was at risk due to administrative delays. “F-1 and H-1B visa holders turned to the CIS Ombudsman when they hit bureaucratic roadblocks within US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) that threatened their legal status and livelihoods,” he said.

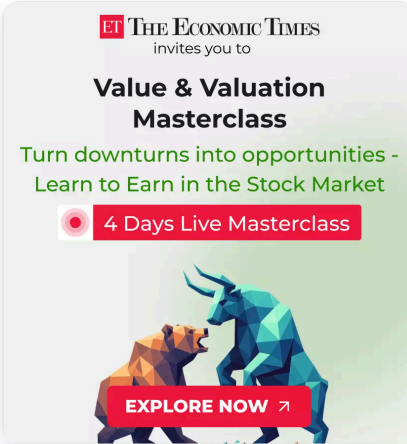
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He cited a case involving a Bangalore-based engineer whose H-1B extension was pending for 11 months. Despite following all procedures and raising multiple service requests, the case remained unresolved until the Ombudsman stepped in. “After the Ombudsman’s intervention, approval came within two weeks,” Khanna added.

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Students also benefited when Optional Practical Training (OPT) applications were mishandled. Khanna shared a case where a student’s OPT request was wrongly denied due to misinterpreted documents. The Ombudsman helped reopen the case, safeguarding the student’s employment and immigration status.

Dalal-Dheini highlighted another case: a STEM OPT application was rejected two months after submission due to a bank processing error. Since the application window had closed, the student was unable to reapply. “The CIS Ombudsman negotiated with the USCIS and was able to get the student reapproved,” she said.

Adam Cohen, partner at immigration law firm Siskind Susser, noted that the office also helped applicants obtain important notices from USCIS and avoid lengthy delays. “The CIS Ombudsman helped in acquiring receipt or approval notices, which were not received and USCIS insisted on filing Form I-824 which entailed a prolonged process to get another one (i.e.: a duplicate),” he said.

The Ombudsman’s office had worked with USCIS to release guidance and host sessions on common issues around student and work visas. According to Dalal-Dheini, even employers benefited when trying to address delayed or missing employment documents filed on behalf of their foreign staff.

“What made the Ombudsman uniquely valuable was its independence from USCIS – they could objectively evaluate whether the agency was following its own procedures and policies,” Khanna said.

He added that the Ombudsman’s involvement was crucial in cases where there was no clear path to resolve errors. In one such instance, a researcher’s green card application had been stuck for over three years due to a background check not being properly logged. The Ombudsman’s efforts led to a resolution.

On questions about whether the office could have helped students who faced self-deportation threats for campus activism, Cohen clarified, “It involves other agencies, viz – Department of State (DOS) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) – the Ombudsman’s office never had a review of DOS and ICE as part of its mission.”

The dismantling of the CIS Ombudsman, along with two other immigration oversight bodies, has raised concerns about limited avenues for redress in a system already facing delays and inconsistencies. Immigration advocates fear the decision may leave many in legal uncertainty with no neutral authority to escalate their grievances.