

No More Waiting?

by Chaleampon Ritthichai
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Kendo McDonald only slept a couple of hours a night at his home in Queens. The rest of the night, he camped out in a sleeping bag in front of the office of Citizenship and Immigration Services at Federal Plaza. His mission was to secure an appointment with the immigrant agency for his client. Because the agency can only take up to about 150 walk-in cases a day, people started to line up earlier and earlier, and the line got longer and longer.

“Before I didn’t have to do this 3 o’clock in the morning thing,” he told the [New York Times](#). “I could come at 8 am.” By the time the office opens, a line usually wraps around the building.

But McDonald might be out of a job and this long line might soon be history. The immigrancy agency has introduced an online appointment system that will allow immigrants to make an appointment without going to Federal Plaza themselves.

“By the fall of this year, I predict that there will be no lines outside of the federal district offices of the United States,” said Eduardo Aguirre, director of United States Citizen and Immigration Services.

Following Miami, Dallas and Los Angeles, the immigration agency in New York City implemented [Infopass](#) in late July to help curb the waiting line for walk-in cases.

According to the agency, 1,400 people visit the New York office on a daily basis. Jason Wong was one of the more than 350,000 people who visited the New York office last year.

“I waited for hours and hours outside of the building and then a few more hours inside” he said. “This new system will definitely help cut the waiting time.”

Immigrant officials acknowledged that people often have to wait for several hours to do business with the agency but had not done much to help fasten the process, until an official in Miami saw people lining up on Sunday night to secure spot on Monday’s morning. His staff member came up with the idea of using the Internet-based appointment system.

“It’s a win-win for everyone,” said agency spokesman Chris Bently.

It is too soon to tell whether infopass can actually help reduce the lines in New York. So far the results in Miami and Los Angeles have shown that it actually does.

But critics said that Infopass is not for everyone.

“It’s great for people who use the Internet. But what about the other half of the population who don’t use it” said Roger Elasmarr, an immigration lawyer. “My experience is that most of my clients and a lot of immigrants do not go online to check anything.”

More importantly, immigrant advocates argued that by choosing to spend its already tight budget on infopass, the agency ignore the real problem.

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“They need to have money to hire staff and to put in systems to deal with these unacceptable backlogs,” said Dan Smulian of the New York Immigration Coalition.

He added that Infopass will only change the way people have to wait. “Instead of waiting three or four hours outside to be told that their case is pending, now they will get an appointment online and go there to be told that their case is still pending.”

The waiting time for a green card in New York City now averages 25 months, compared to 14 months in Los Angeles, according to the agency.

The program will be implemented nationwide later this year. It will be available in 12 languages — Arabic, Chinese, Creole English, French, Korean, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish, Tagalog, Russian and Vietnamese.

An immigrant from Bangkok, Thailand, Chaleampon Ritthichai is the editor of [The Citizen](#). Â