AMERICAN IMMIGRATION LAWYERS ASSOCIATION

GLOSSARY OF COMMON IMMIGRATION TERMS, DOCUMENTS AND AGENCIES

This glossary provides definitions of key terms, documents, and government agencies related to U.S. immigration. It will help you better understand the immigration process by explaining important concepts you may hear.

Common Immigration Terms

A# or Alien Registration Number

A unique seven-, eight-or nine-digit number assigned to a noncitizen in certain circumstances by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. It is often listed on a Form I-797 approval or receipt notice, as well as on an Employment Authorization Document (EAD), where it is called a "USCIS Number."

Alien or Foreign National or Noncitizen

A person who is not a U.S. citizen.

Nonimmigrant

Nonimmigrant refers to a foreign national who enters the U.S. temporarily for a specific purpose and limited time. For example, a foreign national who enters the U.S. as a visitor to vacation at Disney World, who will then return to their home country, is a nonimmigrant.

Immigrant

An immigrant refers to someone who moves to the U.S., usually with the intention to remain permanently.

Port of Entry (POE)

Any location in the United States or its territories that is designated as a point of entry for foreign nationals and U.S. citizens. This includes official entry points along the U.S.-Canada or U.S.-Mexico border, as well as international airports in the United States.

Common Immigration Documents

Visa or Visa Stamp

A document issued by the Department of State and stamped in an individual's passport that allows a person to enter the U.S. for a specific period of time and for a specific purpose. For example, a foreign national who wants to vacation at Disney World may need a B-1/B-2 visitor visa to travel to the United States.

Green Card

Officially known as a Permanent Resident Card, it allows non-citizens to live and work permanently in the United States.

Employment Authorization Document (EAD)

A general term used to describe a card USCIS issues to foreign nationals who are authorized to work in the United States. The card contains a photograph of the individual, their full name, A number (also called USCIS number), and sometimes their fingerprint.

Notice to Appear ("NTA")

NTA is a legal document issued by DHS that notifies an individual of immigration charges against them and requires them to attend a hearing before an immigration judge.

I-797

A notice of action sent by USCIS to applicants/petitioners to communicate the receipt or approval of an immigration case filed with USCIS.

I-94

This document tracks a noncitizens the arrival to and departure from the United States. Previously this document was issued on paper. It is now issued electronically. It dictates the amount of time a foreign national can remain in the U.S. It is also used to demonstrate lawful entry to the U.S. and demonstrate an individual's current immigration status.

U.S. Government Agencies

U.S. Department of Homeland Security ("DHS")

DHS is a government agency responsible for public security. It oversees immigration-related matters for the U.S. and serves as the parent organization for U.S. Customs and Border Protection, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Customs and Border Protection ("CBP")

CBP is an agency within the Department of Homeland Security responsible for securing U.S. borders, enforcing immigration laws, and facilitating lawful trade and travel. It operates at U.S. ports of entry, including borders, airports, and seaports.

United States Citizenship and Immigration Services ("USCIS")

USCIS is the federal agency that processes immigration applications and petitions, such as work permits, permanent residence, temporary protected status, asylum, and citizenship.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement ("ICE")

ICE is an agency of the Department of Homeland Security that enforces U.S. immigration laws within the country's interior. ICE is responsible for initiating removal processes, as well as detention and deportation.

Department of State ("DOS")

DOS is the agency that operates the U.S. Embassies and Consulates worldwide, and thus is responsible for issuing visas.

Department of Labor ("DOL")

DOL is responsible for ensuring that the hiring a foreign worker does not adversely affect U.S. workers.

Executive Officer for Immigration Review ("EOIR")

EOIR is a component of the Department of Justice that oversees the immigration court system, including processing cases related to immigration, asylum, deportation, and other matters. EOIR plays a key role in the legal processes that determines who may remain in the U.S. and who must leave based on U.S. immigration law.