

**SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER**

[http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/national/1155AP\\_Immigration\\_Religious\\_Visas.html](http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/national/1155AP_Immigration_Religious_Visas.html)

 [E-mail this](#)  [Print this](#)  [RSS](#)  
Last updated April 19, 2007 11:40 a.m. PT

**Visa fraud prompts federal church probes**

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON -- The federal government is inspecting churches and religious groups to clamp down on fraud in a visa program for religious workers, government officials said Thursday.

The visits are part of an effort by Citizenship and Immigration Services, a division of the Department of Homeland Security, to tighten rules for the religious worker visas after finding fraud in about 33 percent of applications.

The agency said that because of the level of fraud it did not want to wait until proposed rule changes became final to start checking on the religious organizations.

Every religious organization that files visa applications for its workers will be visited before the application is approved. They may not get a second visit if they seek a visa for a second worker, but could be contacted by phone, said Janis Sposato, an associate director of CIS who led the fraud review.

The review uncovered churches that did not exist and applications filed falsely under the name of a legitimate church that did not petition for the worker, Sposato said.

"This is an ongoing program. There is no start date. We are doing the site visits," Sposato said.

Costs for the federal inspection would be absorbed in fee increases proposed by Citizenship and Immigration Services. Eventually, federal contractors would do the inspections, she said.

The proposed rule changes come 20 months after the agency reviewed the religious worker visa program and found the 33 percent fraud rate, officials said Thursday.

Sposato refused to say whether the review uncovered any terrorism suspects or someone who might cause harm in the country.

The Government Accountability Office reported fraud in the religious visa program in March 1999, finding churches applying for hundreds of visas for people who planned to stay in the country illegally.

The visas, which are temporary, are for foreigners who will work in the country as religious ministers, in a professional religious vocation or job or someone working for a nonprofit religious organization.

Immigration officials want to limit the visas to one year, renewable twice for two years each time. Workers would be required to prove they worked for the religious organization with a W-2 wage statement before a visa can be renewed. Filing of visa applications by individuals at embassies or consulates would end.

The public will have 60 days to comment on the proposed rules. The agency would not say when it hopes to implement the rules.

Kevin Appleby, a spokesman for the National Catholic Conference of Bishops, said Catholic dioceses use the visas frequently. The bishops support tightening rules to eliminate fraud, but want to ensure legitimate religious workers are not prevented from entering the country, he said.

"It's an important program. We hope the restrictions aren't such that makes it an ineffective one," Appleby said.

---

On the Net:

Citizenship and Immigration Services: <http://www.cis.gov>