

Ep #16: The Immigration Waiting Game:
What's Really Happening Behind the Scenes with Mike Valverde



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Hosts

Tracie L. Morgan & Ashley Glimasinski

[Hope In Action: Navigating Immigration with Faith and Care](#)

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Tracie: Hope isn't saying, don't worry, your green card will be here by Christmas. I don't know that. I can't promise that. What I can say though is, here's what we know today. Here's where your case stands. Here's what we're looking for, and you are not going through this alone. Sometimes, that's the most honest hope I can offer.

Ashley: The Psalms are full of trust in God, but they're also full of people asking, "How long, oh Lord?" Psalm 13 doesn't pretend waiting is easy because there's frustration there. There's grief and uncertainty, but somehow there's also still faith. Communities may not be able to shorten someone's processing time, but we can make sure they don't have to wait alone. Waiting with someone is an act of love.

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Tracie: Hi, I'm Tracie.

Ashley: And I'm Ashley.

Welcome to Hope In Action, where we offer clear insights, practical tools, and inspiring stories to navigate immigration with confidence, compassion, and faith.

Each week, we break down the law, share real-world examples, and help you speak up, live out your values, and make a difference in your community.

Whether you're looking to understand immigration through a faith-driven lens, have courageous conversations with those who matter to you, or take small steps toward justice, you're in the right place. Let's dive in.

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Ashley: Welcome back to Hope in Action. I'm Ashley.

Tracie: And I'm Tracie.

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Ashley: So there is one experience almost everyone who goes through the immigration system has in common. That is waiting, waiting for a work permit, a green card, an interview, permission to travel, or even permission to reunite with your family. And the strange thing about immigration waiting is that you often don't know how long you're going to be waiting. I like to call it the nebulous black hole of waiting on immigration actions. You send in your application, and then you wait.

Tracie: And wait and wait. And as an immigration attorney, one of the hardest questions I get is probably also the most common, and that is, why is this taking so long? Sometimes I know, and sometimes I have to just take an educated guess. And honestly, sometimes it's because I have no idea. And I hate not knowing. And so, you know, I'm talking with someone who's waiting to see their mother, start a job, maybe travel to a funeral. And they want to know if they're going to be able to stay with their family as well. So that's a hard wait.

Ashley: It really is. And when you're on the outside of USCIS, the process can seem almost ridiculously simple. You send in your application, someone reviews it, someone makes a decision. So when a year goes by and you've had maybe only two updates, and one of those is just a notice saying, hey, we got your application, it's really understandable to wonder, is anyone actually looking at this? Did somebody lose my case? And why did my friend get approved when they filed six months after I did?

Tracie: Oh, gosh. If I had a dime for each time I heard those. And I mean, those are questions I hear multiple times a week. So today, instead of guessing about what's happening behind the scenes, we're talking with someone who actually knows. So Michael or Mike Valverde, previously served as Associate Director of Field Operations for US Citizenship and Immigration Services, where he had an

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extraordinary view of how our immigration system actually functions. Mike, welcome to Hope in Action.

Mike: Great. Thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Tracie: Thank you. Thank you. Well, let's start with your old job. Associate Director of Field Operations is one of those government titles that sounds very impressive, and is, but probably means almost nothing to the average person. So what did you actually do? What were you responsible for?

Mike: Yeah, no, that's a great perspective. I think the more words in the title, the less responsibility you have, right? The president is just president. So I was the associate director of field operations at USCIS until I retired about a year ago, for about four years. And before that, I was the deputy of that same long title for another four or five years. So for about the last 10 years, my job was to oversee all the field operations for USCIS, which really means those offices in about 90 communities across the country that people go to have their interviews for green card or for citizenship. The team also did citizenship ceremonies, so all the naturalization ceremonies that happen around the country. And there's something called the National Benefit Center, which fell under field operations, which does a lot of employment authorization, advanced parole, intercountry adoptions. And finally, employment investors, so the EB-5 program fell under my umbrella. And really what it meant was I was in charge of operations occurring efficiently and correctly through those entities.

Tracie: You stayed busy.

Mike: Yes, it was, you know, the boss always hears about the bad things and not the good things. So a lot of daily drama and troubleshooting.

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Ashley: Wow, that sounds like so much work at the same time. I know you said that the title comes with so many extra responsibilities, but it seems like you've had an inside look at the system that most of us haven't had. So I'm really curious for this conversation. I want to pretend for just a second that I'm an immigrant who's just filed an application. And this is not new for me actually because I've done this with my husband. But for example, in this case, I'm the immigrant. I've gathered birth certificates and tax returns and photographs and all the documents that come with that. I've paid the filing fee and I've mailed this enormous package or submitted something online as you can do these days. And then from my perspective as the immigrant, that package disappears. What happens next that the applicant never sees?

Mike: That is a great question and I can imagine that perspective. And you know, we've spent a lot of time thinking about that perspective. So what happens next is a flurry of activity in the first, I don't know, 48, 72 hours, right? And so you submit it either online or a paper filing to a USCIS address and that gets, that paper filing gets opened and the papers get scanned in. The fee gets deposited and a bunch of activities start, right?

And those activities are they take the information from your application forms. They send some of it off to do background checks, so to law enforcement agencies, the FBI and others. Some information goes that way. And then the application itself goes to its first USCIS stop, right? And that is depending on what you're asking for, it goes to different locations. And we can talk about that. But the general steps are that once the information is scanned in and inputted into systems, USCIS takes some preliminary steps, right? They make sure the package is complete. All the necessary things like you mentioned, photographs and everything is signed. And of course, the fees are already taken care of are in there. And if they're not, in field operations, we had a team at the National Benefit Center, which I mentioned a

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minute ago, which would go through it item by item and then ask you for anything that's missing. So all of that happens over the first, like I said, 48, 72 hours.

And then there is a lot of waiting, right? And then it's, you know, to cut to the heart of the matter, there are more cases coming in every day than hours of staff time to look at them and review them and decide them, right? And so a number of things happen right away, as I said, and then there's a waiting time before the decider, the human who's going to review all the facts, look at all the papers, look at the results of those background checks, is going to put all of that together and start thinking about making a decision, right? That person, when your case comes in, is busy doing that all day, every day for cases that came in before. And just, you know, it's a, it's a division problem, right? And the math is not great in terms of waiting time. So all that activity happens, and then there's a wait. And that's your processing time. 90%, 99% of your processing time is not, you know, someone at USCIS stroking their chin and saying what to do about the Tracie Morgan issue, it's really waiting, right? And, you know, depending on the case, there are moments where there's consideration and debate and all of that, but for a lot of time and a lot and the majority of cases, it's just waiting until its turn is up.

Tracie: My goodness. Yeah, Ashley likes to call it the Nebulous Black Hole. And I think that's accurate.

Ashley: I do. That's my word for it. It just feels like it disappears, but I understand that there's just not enough people to process all the cases. Like, obviously within a one, two-week period, it does take time.

Tracie: And I think I heard something crazy that USCIS received something like 10,000 pieces of mail or applications a day. Am I remembering that right, Mike?

Mike: I think that is probably true. I would have said much more depending on the time of year, but yeah, I mean, in particular, each case, as you all know, comes with

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lots of information. That's usually the easiest, but then there are requests for evidence, there's late submissions, and there's all kinds of other paper that keep coming to the USCIS lock boxes. And it's, you know, it's its own industry to keep up with all the records.

Unfortunately, you know, more of it than I think just about all of us would like is paper, right? And you know, I don't know that it's humorous, but the humor or the irony that I find is that so many people work on cases and then they have them in their laptop and they have them in their word documents and they print them out and they mail them and then they're immediately scanned in and those paper files are eventually shredded and they just have this very short life of meaning only because, you know, the technology and the connections of technology just aren't there. And I think that, you know, that explains a lot about how operations have been organized for years at USCIS.

Tracie: And you talked about that flurry of activity in the beginning and lock boxes and service centers, the National Benefit Center. And even though a lot of the time is spent waiting, to me it sounds like there's a lot of touch points. Like, how does an application travel and how many people actually look at it before it gets in front of that deciding adjudicator?

Mike: Yeah, another good question. The, you know, the point I just made about the paper process, so many of the processes at USCIS that I knew up until my retirement, and you know, I own all the things I'm talking about, was unable to, you know, completely modernize and make efficient and all that. Really are based, so many of the processes are based on the old paper process, right? And so in the old days, you would apply with a petition, an I-130, that shows, hey, this is the US citizen relative I have, here's the proof of our relationship. And you could apply at the same time to get your green card. Hey, this is my I-485, this shows that I'm admissible, I haven't broken the laws, I can support myself.

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And the process was one group of people over here would adjudicate the petition, and we thought for efficiency's sake, you know, there are another people here who would have an interview and would adjudicate the application for the green card, the I-485 form. And over the years, right, we've moved from paper to electronic. And even if you fill out a paper form, it gets into electronic systems and we can do a lot more parallel processing and all of that. But there's still a lot of humans in the process for your question. And it could be, you know, depending on the application or the petition you submit and what comes along with it, that one group of humans does one step or two steps or three steps and then they send it over to another group of people in a whole different, you know, geography or in a whole different part of the building or something like that to do the final steps and make the decision. And if your case is complicated or if there's a criminal record or an issue that needs exploration, there might be some other subject matter experts that intervene. So yeah, there are many roads and many paths and each case makes its way to eventually the adjudicator who decides the case, but unfortunately, it can be very complicated. Now, I'd say, you know, 90% of cases are what, you know, we used to call happy path, which just meant straightforward, right? There were no complexities. It was one case was like the next in terms of its facts and in terms of no complications, but for those extra 10 or those other 10%, that's where the complications would arise.

Ashley: So it sounds like you had to deal with a lot of cases, a lot of paperwork coming through, electronic or, you know, physical paper otherwise. And I can just imagine how many pages crossed your desk and crossed the desk of all of your coworkers during this time while they're waiting, while people are listening their applications and waiting for that process. And that makes me think of something that I want to bring us back to that we talk about on this podcast, which is our faith. And our faith teaches us that every person has inherent dignity and worth. But it sounds like you're describing a system that has to process millions of applications.

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How do you keep the individual human being from disappearing behind their case number?

Mike: Yeah. No, that was something we thought about a lot. And before I got to my job, so I don't take credit for this. Someone came up with a, I guess it was a slogan. It wasn't our mission statement or our vision statement, but in field operations, we said we change lives every day. And on all of our documentation, on our websites or internal websites and material, it would say changing lives every day. And we, we had a team of smart graphics people and would use that a lot. And one of the perks of being the associate director or the boss and you know, to my team's dismay is I got to talk to them a lot. And what over the years that I was in that role, I really got down. I made a joke, but I don't even think it's a joke. I think it's more the truth. I had one speech.

And the speech that I gave sort of monthly or bimonthly to all 8,000 or whatever the field operations directorate consisted of was based around changing lives every day. Like if we do immigration right, we are, you know, in a 360 degree way, we're changing the lives of the people sitting in front of us that are getting interviewed. Or if you're not an interviewing staff member, if you're, you know, scheduling the naturalization ceremony, if you're moving paper files, all of those represent people who have, you know, really sincere hopes and dreams and plans that depend on the decision, right? Wrong, indifferent, or I have to say approve or deny, indifferent to the outcome because the 360 degree way we look at it is we're changing lives every day. And those lives could be ones of our neighbors in our community, not just the applicants in front of us.

If, you know, and again, they heard this speech over and over again. If we do our jobs right and we make the right decisions, everyone's better off, right? The communities that we live in are better off, we're better off, and of course the applicants in front of us get the thing that they've been waiting for. So, you know,

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we focused on that a lot, right? It, you know, it helped it helped remind the workforce that their job was important, right? So we had some self-interest in doing it. But we thought the job was important, is important, right? We think immigration is, you know, administering the nation's legal immigration system. We always use lofty words like that is really important. And if we do it right, it has this really positive effect not just on the consumers of the service, but on everyone. So they heard that over and over again. I apologize to them still today.

Tracie: I hope they still hear that over and over again. Who knows what's happening now, but that's that's so important. So, Mike, I have a question that immigration lawyers and advocates hear constantly, and I'm sure it trickled back up to you. Why is this taking so long? And so, what are some of the biggest causes of delays? I know you mentioned earlier just having staffing, but what are some of the bottlenecks maybe that we just don't see?

Mike: Yeah, no, and staffing is kind of a self-serving answer, right? I think the, you know, I'll give you the really big answer and then maybe more specific, helpful answer. The really big answer is the system as it's built has all these incentives to add intricacy to the process. And what I mean the process is someone files a request and someone at the end of it gets a decision. And the process is everything that happens between. The system has very few incentives to streamline that, to make it efficient. And it's getting, you know, with something like AI, it's getting even less incentive to do that. So what I mean by that is Congress can have a deep thought and change the law and add a new requirement. The Department of Homeland Security, the president, the head of USCIS can do the same and add a new requirement.

In my old job, I could add a new requirement because I thought we weren't doing something right or I could add a new quality assurance requirement. All of that makes the process longer. Or if it doesn't make the process longer, it takes some

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people who could make the process faster off that job and put them on other jobs so that the math problem becomes even worse in the favor of going fast. And there's, like I said, there's not a lot of incentives for making it quicker. Now, having said that, we were asked as a leadership team a few years ago what we thought USCIS should be like in 10 years. You know, and I think we're five years into that now and I won't opine on the progress we made towards this. Without exception, everyone said immediate benefits for no money. Like there's got to be some way that we can get people 72 hours, 48 hours, a decision. And the prices are negligible, right? And so we've been going the opposite ways for years. So, you know, I hope we get there and I hope it's technology. I hope it's Congress streamlining the law or whatever.

So anyway, that is a long explanation for why I think systemically it takes a long time. And I'm not super hopeful that there are a lot of forces pushing for mitigation there. Some, you know, sort of daily case by case reasons why it can take longer, just complexity, you know, and it almost is like a snowball rolling downhill, the longer you're here, the more life happens, the more things that immigration officers are going to learn about and have questions about. So sometimes the wait is its own problem. And then just if that complexity exists irrespective of the wait, if there's, you know, a series of relationships or children or law enforcement issues or geographic moves or career changes, all of that could raise immigration issues, right? Have you maintained your status? Have you, were you free to marry? All of those things. So, you know, simplicity equals speed, complexity is equaling delay. You know, that's as straightforward as I can say in terms of that process that I was talking about. Sorry, that was a long answer.

Ashley: That is okay. I think that actually answers my next question too. I was thinking about how, you know, there's something that often drives people crazy when two people file the same kind of application, like same form, same office,

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they file it at the same time or like within a week of each other, and then one gets approved quicker than the other. Sometimes, you know, drastically quicker, like we're talking a year or two years faster. And it sounds like that might happen because maybe their cases are different. Could you shine some light on why that happens?

Mike: Yeah, no, another question that I used to get all the time and I still get. It was my hope and I'll leave you all to shake your head or nod your head that those disparities were getting less and less, or at least they were more obvious for why they happened, right? I think in the old days, and old days I mean, you know, 2000, 2005, when the process was so much paper-based, there really were identical cases could take wildly divergent time to get through. And that was because of, you know, paper folders sitting on people's desks, right? And if Tracie was like I'm sure she is, super on top of things, she would get it out right away. But if Michael was having a coffee break and that case was hard, I might put it to the back, right? And the system allowed for that sort of disparity. And so, you know, I would say back then, the USCIS did not have a good answer to that question other than just there are a lot of paths, there are a lot of humans, it's paper and it could take different times. We've gotten better, the agency has gotten better at knowing where its work is and assigning it based on its age.

So I'm hopeful, and this is where my hope comes at the start of this answer, that this disparity is getting, if it's not getting less frequent, it's getting more understandable. And that's where if you do have a complication in your case, your case is going to take longer. If you don't, it's going to go through and hopefully it'll go through along the same lines as someone else's who doesn't have, you know, those same complications in your file. But yeah, if you're if you have an arrest, you're more likely to get an interview than have a case that could get approved without an interview. If, you know, if there's just too many details in your file and

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the officer thinks that getting, you know, verbal communication and gets a chance to ask the questions to straighten out the matter, that could actually end up making your case go faster, but overall it's going to take extra time for then when compared to cases that don't have those same issues. So that's yeah, I mean, I think that's how I'd say. Hopefully today, the disparity means, you know, unfortunately for the person waiting longer that there's something unique about their case.

Tracie: That's so interesting to I just think about how we want to automate so much, but then how much of it still is so personal, right? On workflow and things like that. So I will keep that in mind when my client say, well, my neighbor's case got decided in two weeks, Tracie, you're a bad lawyer, my case is taking two months. So I'll just send them a link to this.

Mike: Yeah, it doesn't it doesn't give you a great answer. I mean, and the other thing is officers, depending on the type of case, have a lot of discretion, more discretion than you ever than I ever thought they would have before I entered into the field. They have sort of statutory and regulatory based discretion where it says they can weigh factors, but they also have a lot of discretion to say that evidence counts, that evidence is good enough, and that evidence isn't, and I have a question for you instead. And that can add months of delay, if you know, in the latter case, if they say, well, I don't think that's quite meeting the standards, I'm going to give you a request for evidence. So there's there's just a lot of discretion built into the system.

Tracie: Absolutely. And then you get administration changes. And while immigration law remains the same, we haven't seen congressional action in a very long time, and new administration comes in and issues new guidance and policies and things are handled very differently. So what happens within the agency when the White House, for example, says, hey, these are our priorities. We're going to start to do this differently.

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Mike: That's a great and loaded question. So the way that you started the question and talking about administrations, I think that's a good way to start answering it. Different administrations and different leadership have different styles. And, you know, so there's a spectrum of answers to that about how the agency adjusts to policy changes, right? And on the one end of the spectrum, just the end that I guess I liked as Associate Director of Field Operations is they would announce the change, they would give us a minute to think about what it means. We would maybe say to them, you know, you say we're going to do 10 of these and four of these. Well, we think we could do it better and meet your same objectives if we do nine of these and five of these. And have that dialogue. And then we would decide on the final policy as it's articulated, train our staff and then say, okay, two weeks from now, everyone know that the policy is going to change and prepare for it. And then we go, right?

So you see what I'm saying, just super transparent, super public facing. The consumers, the people who are going to use the policy, uses probably the wrong word, but who are going to try to show that they comply with the policy, have warning, and the officers have the training in order to make the right decision on the day the new policy goes. All the way the other end of the spectrum, and I think what we've what we've seen, you know, more often than not, certainly under my last few months under this new administration, but even under the last administration a little bit for, you know, I guess I should let them articulate their reasons why, you know, for leaks or what, I don't know, there's been much more of the we're going to announce the policy. Sometimes on a late Friday afternoon and it's going to be effective Monday or effective immediately. And, you know, poor immigration lawyers, poor immigration officers will meet at that Monday 7:30 a.m. interview, and neither side of the desk will know exactly what it all means, right? And that's really frustrating.

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So I put that a lot on the style of the administration, the style of the leadership, their comfort with sharing what they're going to do ahead of time. You know, and obviously if you're going to do something simple and straightforward, then it's easy and there's no risk to share it ahead of time. I guess if you're going to do something controversial that's going to change a lot, it's easier to announce it at the last minute and maybe avoid litigation or the push back or whatever. But again, that's not, you know, it's not my reason to own. Again, a long answer to say, it really depends. We'd like from the civil servant, the bureaucrat side, as much transparency and advanced warning as possible, just so that we can make it work easily and we can make it work efficiently and not have to pause things or put cases on hold because we don't know now are you qualifying? Now are you not? Do we have to issue a request for evidence for new information or what? So I don't know if that's responsive, but that's been my experience with policy change.

Ashley: That is so interesting. I feel like you've just pulled back the curtain on things a little bit, because I know from, I mean, I won't speak for Tracie, but I can imagine from the immigration lawyer side, but especially from the immigrant side, when things change so quickly or even from the advocate perspective, we're just constantly under a barrage it feels like from different changes happening. Okay, this used to be the rule, and now it's not. And this used to be the way things were done, and now it's not. What's the new way? No one's sure. And it gets very confusing. And I feel like in situations like that, when you're frustrated with a system and with bureaucracy, it's really easy to make the person behind the desk, like the USCIS officer, into the villain. And I'm sure that's unfair to the people who work at USCIS, like you and the other officers who are just really doing their job and like you said, trying to make a difference in people's lives. So what's one misconception that you wish people didn't have about USCIS employees?

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Mike: Yeah, there's a bunch, but I think just to continue with the theme and some of the themes that we've talked about and tying them together a little bit. So I think the biggest misconception that I'd like to correct is that the officer doesn't care. The officer cares about the wait times. You know, they're, you know, selfishly, their life is much better when applicants aren't frustrated when the people that they're interviewing have had a great experience and obviously the longer the wait, the more complicated or opaque the process is. Their experience on an interview, case by case, in and out day is harder. So they care about that. They also care about it just for the merits of the of the situation, right? If they, like I said, if they're asked their preference would be to have immediate decisions for as low of an entry cost as possible. So, you know, I think that's the biggest misconception. The officers, not as personally as the applicants, never, because they are not, you know, seeking a benefit from an agency that can change their lives. But they're aware of that power and they're aware, you know, sort of they have more empathy than I think the stereotype would suggest. So that's what I'd say is the biggest misconception.

Tracie: That is so interesting and I just want to say as an immigration lawyer, I think one of your former colleagues said, you know, we want to make sure that the right person gets the right benefit at the right time. And we're not adversarial when we go into these interviews and yeah, you know, we're just people trying to get through the system as best we can. So I would like to transition us over to talking a little bit more about justice, mercy, and hope. Ashley, we talk a lot about Micah 6:8. Do you want to take the lead on this next question?

Ashley: Yes, I think that's been our focus verse for the season even. Micah 6:8 says, do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God. And we talk a lot about how those three ideas that justice, mercy, and humility are really fascinating when we talk about immigration because government has a responsibility to administer and enforce laws, but those laws do actually affect human beings. So in

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your role at USCIS, did you ever feel a tension between enforcing the rules, treating people with mercy, and recognizing that really no system ever gets everything right?

Mike: Yes, every day. I think as a leader of people, you know, so not even talking about immigration, myself in a role where I hire people, I had to fire people, I had to, you know, give them praise, but also tell them when they did things incorrectly. And you know, one of the for good or bad or effective or not, one of the things, you know, I'm not a yeller in my life, so this is easy for me, but if I had to, you know, sort of holler at someone, I'd say, "Hey, Ashley, come into my office. I have to holler at you for a minute." And then, you know, my voice would never get higher than that or louder than that. And just sharing the news in a safe and direct way. You know, I don't know if that's if that's what you're talking about, but just in terms of leading people, you know, there's different ways that you can dispense things that are really important to people, good or bad, and, you know, I think one of the things you learn very quickly in immigration, I'll talk about immigration in a minute, is the way that you dispense it is often as important as the, well, maybe not as important, but is really important.

Now, as an immigration example, early in my career, or in the middle of my career, I guess, I had a role pertaining to intercountry adoptions, right? So people, American citizens wanted to adopt from a foreign country. And, you know, obviously that takes two governments laws to agree and there's babies involved, so or I guess it isn't always a baby, but there's children involved. And it came to be that one country, and I guess I won't get into the details, the system in the country was really difficult to administer. There were lots of very credible allegations of bad practices, money exchanging hands, mothers being coerced, mothers being told stories about what happened to their baby at the hospital, you know, just really awful things. And the host country, for lack of a better word, the country that, you

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know, this was happening in, did not really give our staff a lot of room to investigate.

So we were left as a government with this really murky, credible sound. We had a few statements from women who had some pretty powerful stories about what had happened to them and in the midst of it, there was a very vigorous adoption tempo in that country, right? And I won't say it's a trade because it's humans, but there's a lot of adoptions happening. And we came, you know, it wasn't just me, but me and my colleagues and colleagues at the State Department came to the determination that we couldn't operate in this environment and we had to end our pause, I guess is what we ended up saying, adoptions in this country because it, you know, we couldn't validate, right? The basics of the immigration law says that we have to validate the adoption and that the child was an orphan. And we just couldn't. Of course, there were hundreds of cases that were in process. And at that time, the country and the processes were such that the perspective adopted parents saw pictures of their infants, of the infants before the adoptions were finalized.

So we stepped into this and I was pretty new to the field, so I was learning about all these sensitivities, so I'm sure I made some mistakes along the way. But in this situation where there were these prospective adopted parents who are 1,000,000% bonded to these pictures of little children in a far off country, some of them had gone and had met them at the orphanage. Some of them have been sponsoring the orphanages for years. And we had just a series of, sorry, this is a long story, but we had a series of, you know, super difficult cases to say, hey, you know, Mr. and Mrs. whomever, we have profound doubts about whether your child, they have a picture of on your refrigerator, you pray for every night, whatever you're sponsor them, you buy them food, is really an orphan. And, you know, and not just five or six cases like that, but hundreds. And, you know, so getting to the question about mercy, getting through those cases one by one, you know, I don't know that I spoke

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to every parent, but I spoke to a lot of them. I'm sure some of them cursed my name out and some of them have, you know, really unpleasant memories of what they feel I put them through, but working each of those cases, looking at each of the individual records and then doing the immigration lawyer thing and applying the law and saying, have you met the burden? Is it preponderance?

And getting through those cases and then pausing adoptions, and I'm happy to say, I think they resumed some years later is one of those things where, yeah, you know, there was no good answer. There was no sort of private market-based solution that was ever going to do this. So this was what government is there for is making this hard decision, but thinking about the stakeholders involved, you know, I ended up flying over to this country and touring the orphanages and that will break your heart if nothing else. And being able to meet with those parents and look them in the eye and get them through their cases, be as transparent as possible.

You know, a lot of story there to say, I think the process was as important as the outcome. I don't know that the perspective adopted parents would ever say that because they either have or don't have their family the way that they thought they were going to. And that's everything. But the government could have done it in a million more abrupt and disruptive ways. And you know, so I'm kind of proud about that. I'm kind of sad about that. It's a whole big thing. But anyway, that's what I thought of when I heard this question is there's a system, it's not perfect, the world isn't perfect, and you know, we just hope that someone has, I say the word empathy again, someone can imagine the person on the other side of the desk as they're going through it. So, you know, it could be a green card or employment authorization and not a little baby, but it's all the same.

Tracie: Mike, your story hits so close to home for me. I don't think you know this, but my sister, she's adopted from Russia. And about 30 years ago, and just thinking

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about, you know, the video that we got of her at the orphanage when she was about six months old and then my dad and stepmom going over in January to Russia to pick her up and they were there for a month. And had they been told no at the end of that and come home empty-handed, how heartbreaking that would be. And like I'm tearing up just thinking about that and my sister, she's now a special ed teacher in Wichita and she has two kids. And, yeah, like you said earlier, you change lives every day. So thank you for helping to change my family's life.

Mike: It was before my time, I'll say that.

Tracie: Well, still, even so. I know that we're running short on time, which just kills me, but we do have three quick questions for you. First, if you could tell every immigrant who's waiting for USCIS for something, what would you tell them?

Mike: Oh, man, that is a tough question. I guess I would go practical. If the delay is weighing on them, that's natural and I can't dispel that. But I would tell them that 90% of the delay and 90% of the time, it's not because USCIS has a profound problem with your case. It is that it is waiting somewhere collecting dust until the human can get there and look at your case. So, you know, with my apologies, the system has not progressed to a better outcome set than that. So you know, if that's reassuring, that's the kind of reassurance I would give.

Ashley: So we've also talked a lot about the immigrant in this chat with you and how the immigrant experiences this system. But I'm also thinking about the Americans who have never experienced USCIS or navigated the immigration system. So if you could talk to those Americans who have never experienced this system, what would you want them to understand?

Mike: Another great perspective, another great question. I mean, I think the thing that I would want to share about the immigration system, and this comes from, you know, discussions with relatives and certainly reading the media is that the

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immigration system is super complicated. Even the best and the brightest, the most educated, most highly sought after professionals have a really difficult time getting their visas to come here, getting their green cards to stay here. And if you again, if you take a 360 look, you know, not everyone is the best educated with all the resources. And so everyone who's trying to access the system is accessing a really complicated, lengthy process. And it's not as simple as good hearts get green cards and bad hearts get denials. It is very complicated. And yeah, I mean, I guess that's the thing I would I would share. Too much of it is boiled down into a good guys versus bad guys, an all versus nothing, but it is so much more complicated than that. So I don't know if that's helpful to the average citizen. Immigration, it's complicated, but it is it is deep and it's hard. I don't think it has to be as deep and hard as it is, but it currently is.

Tracie: I think that's a great segue to our last question. I'm going to ask you to keep this to one thing. If you had the power to change one thing about our immigration system, and it would impact these delays that we've been talking about, so we'll narrow it down a bit. What would you change to help that?

Mike: So, magic wand changes to impact delays. If I could change one thing. I think the easy answer would be to say more resources, more people so the math problem gets better, right? And so when someone files an application, there is a human who is like waiting for it to come in and they can do it. I think that the answer though, I think that's kind of a cop out. That kind of gives relevance to the incredibly complicated system that everyone has built around these requests. So I think if I could wave the magic wand, something with technology, maybe with AI that is simple, that is transparent, that is efficient. I want to say that love it, think it's intrusion or think it's great, the government knows a heck of a lot about people and could be making decisions very quickly. And I think there's got to be a way to re-envision things so that magic wand change to deal with these wait times would

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be to re-imagine our systems and have a lot of the evaluations on people, you know, if you got a green card, we know about you. So if you come to get your citizenship, we know about you. Why does it take another year, another six months, whatever. Like we thought we were successful when it was six months or four months, you know, but it shouldn't be, right? It should be like a weekend or something. The government knows a lot about you. So my magic wand, my one answer is, can we find some processes and technology and ownership and responsibility and accountability that allow us to make decisions that quickly?

Ashley: Here, here to that. I would love to see that imagined system come into place. We all need that magic wand, I think. Well, Mike, thank you so much for spending your time with us today. You've given us a much better picture, I think, of what is actually happening at USCIS and as people are waiting on their applications. Like I said earlier, you've pulled back the veil a little bit. So thank you for spending time with us and we so appreciate all of your insights.

Mike: My pleasure. Really cathartic for me. So thank you.

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Ashley: It was so great talking with Mike and he helped us understand why delays happen. I think that understanding the mechanics matters, but knowing why you're waiting, as we talked about, doesn't necessarily make the waiting any easier.

Tracie: No, it really doesn't. And one thing that struck me in our conversation is how easily we use the words like backlog and processing times and those are administrative words. But people are actually living those months and those years. They're separated potentially. A processing time isn't just a number on the USCIS website. It's a piece of somebody's life.

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Ashley: And waiting changes the way that people live because you don't know whether you'll be able to work next year or travel or whether your spouse is going to be able to join you, whether you'll be allowed to stay in the country. When there's all that uncertainty, how do you plan a life around that? And that just brings up my own husband's immigration story. And we were separated for a couple months. There was a time when I had to come back to the US to establish a presence. And when we said goodbye at the airport, I didn't know when I would see him again. That was really a hard moment to have that goodbye and to say, I'll see you sometime. And then when he was here and we were actually together, which was really great, but we were still waiting on his green card approval. We didn't know how long it was going to be until he could work. So we couldn't make any plans for the future because we didn't know when that future was going to start.

Tracie: It's so true. You know, I see it constantly. You know, I've had clients miss funerals because they couldn't travel or see a sick family member, a parent even, before they passed away. These are people who maybe haven't seen their parents in over 20 years. People are having to turn down job opportunities because the job requires international travel and they don't know when and if they're going to get that permission. I've even talked to couples who have delayed having children because they're not sure that they want to start that if they're not sure which country they're going to be in and how that's going to look.

And then, you know, we also have families who spend thousands of dollars filing these applications and they're renewing work permits while they wait. Sometimes, too, the waiting itself changes the legal situation. Time passes. You know, a child turns 21, which can change their category and if they can come to the US. We have policy changes like we just talked about with administrations. You know, maybe a visa category retrogresses and what was available last month isn't available this

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month. We, you know, I've seen cases where the petitioner gets sick or dies and now suddenly the beneficiary is left stranded. I mean, life keeps moving even when the immigration case doesn't.

Ashley: That is so true and I think that churches, Christians, Americans, I think we all underestimate that. Because we hear, "Oh, you're waiting for immigration, that'll just be a couple of months, right?" But still waiting can mean years, as we talked about with Mike, like, you know, he wishes the process could be a weekend for naturalization and I would absolutely love that. But instead it could be six months, a year, two years. We don't know. And there is so much spiritual weight to living with that much uncertainty.

Tracie: And you know, I'm thinking about, you know, in a couple weeks, I have an asylum interview for a gentleman who's been here for 14 years. He had young children when they came here and now they've gone to school here. They may have been four when I met them and now they're 18. Think about that, about living that whole time not knowing if this was going to be your home or not. And you know, I hear this phrase by well-meaning Christians all the time. And that is, it's all in God's timing. And I certainly understand what people mean by that. It's not, you know, derogatory or anything like that. But when someone's been separated from their child for five years or they're not able to say goodbye to a sick parent, maybe that's not what they need us to say to them.

Ashley: Yeah, and I think there's an important distinction to make there because I also know immigrants who are Christians who will say that phrase exactly themselves. They'll say, "It's all in God's timing." They're living here in the United States or they're overseas and they've lived with years of waiting and uncertainty. And they trust that God is taking care of them. And that just is incredibly moving to me and inspiring to me because I see how deep their faith is, that they don't know what the future holds. They don't know if they'll be able to stay in the United

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States. They don't know if they'll be able to go to a safe country. But they always say, it's all in God's timing and God is caring for me. So I don't want us to dismiss that kind of faith either.

Tracie: No, absolutely not. And I think there's a huge difference between someone finding hope in God's timing in the middle of their own suffering and then somebody on the outside using God's timing to explain that suffering to them. One is testimony, but the other can become and feel like a platitude.

Ashley: Oh my gosh, it really can. And scripture actually gives us room for both. The psalms are full of trust in God, but they're also full of people asking, "How long, oh Lord?" Psalm 13 doesn't pretend waiting is easy because there's frustration there. There's grief and uncertainty, but somehow there's also still faith.

Tracie: Or maybe that's the balance, right? That faith doesn't require us to pretend that waiting doesn't hurt. We can trust God and still lament. We can believe God is present and still ask why something is taking so long. And when we're walking alongside someone else who is waiting, maybe our job isn't to explain God's timing to them because what do we know? Maybe our job is simply to stay with them in the waiting.

Ashley: So how do you keep somebody from losing hope when you genuinely don't know when the waiting will end?

Tracie: You know, in my job, I've had to learn to separate hope from prediction. Hope isn't saying, you know, don't worry, your green card will be here by Christmas. I don't know that. I can't promise that. And these false assurances, that's not hope. What I can say though is, here's what we know today. Here's where your case stands. Here's what we're looking for, and you are not going through this alone. Sometimes, that's the most honest hope I can offer.

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Ashley: I also think that's where Mike's comments about justice, mercy, and humility come back in. Because humility means admitting when we don't have the answer. And mercy means seeing the person who is hurting instead of treating their waiting as an administrative inconvenience or offering those false reassurances. As he mentioned, he spoke to the potential adoptive parents and said, "Look, this is the system as we see it, and we have to take care of the children. We don't want to diminish your hopes and dreams for the future either, but we do have to take care of the humans that are involved in this process also." And justice asks us to look at a system where people routinely spend years in uncertainty and ask whether we can do better.

Tracie: Yes. And for Christians, I think there's still one more piece to that. We're called to wait with people, not just to tell them to wait. That's really different. We can't necessarily make USCIS adjudicate someone's application tomorrow. But we can make them dinner. We can give someone a ride or help with childcare. We can listen without immediately trying to fix something. And Lord, I need help with that. We can remember when our friend has a court date or an interview, and we can keep showing up six months later when there's not an answer. And we can also give some recommendations like, "Hey, have you thought about following up with the agency or through congressional inquiries or talking to your lawyer so that when they feel like their case is stuck in that nebulous black hole, might be some solutions?"

Ashley: We all need assistance when we feel like our case is stuck in that nebulous black hole. So those are really great ways to show up for our friends, our family, and our neighbors. And I think that's what hope in action looks like during a season when nothing seems to be happening. You just keep showing up. So, as we think about this episode and how we've talked with Mike about USCIS and delays and processing, we have, as usual, our small action and a conversation tip for you. So

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the small action this week is pretty simple. Communities may not be able to shorten someone's processing time, but we can make sure they don't have to wait alone. Waiting with someone is an act of love.

Tracie: And what does that actually look like? I would say if you know someone who's going through the immigration process, there's one question you should not ask. And that is, is there any news yet? Instead, ask, how are you doing while you're waiting? Because maybe there isn't any news. But asking how they're doing tells them something differently. It's like, I see you. I know that the waiting is hard, and I am still here with you.

Ashley: As someone who's been through that process, I can tell you how helpful that is to know that people are walking alongside you. They're caring for you. They're not asking you questions that you also have, like, "How long is it going to take?" Any news? I wish there was, but I really don't have anything. So that is so important to just walk alongside someone, support them in that waiting. We also have a conversation tip for you this week. And that is, what would it look like for your church or your community to become better at waiting with people? Not fixing or explaining or promising that everything is going to work out, but just faithfully showing up in the uncertainty. Talk about that with someone this week.

Tracie: And we have one more invitation before we go. At the end of the season, Ashley and I are planning an ask me anything episode. So we want your questions.

Ashley: That could be something you've heard this season that made you curious. Maybe you have a question about immigration, faith, advocacy, or something you've always wondered about the immigration system, but you felt uncomfortable asking or you didn't know who to ask it to.

Tracie: Send it all to us. And seriously, make them difficult. We don't want just the easy ones. You don't have to know the right terminology. You don't have to phrase

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it perfectly. Just ask us what you really want to know. And we might be able to answer your question on the show.

Ashley: We're looking forward to it. But until next time, thanks for listening to Hope in Action.

Tracie: We'll see you next time.

Tracie: This podcast is to inform, educate, and entertain and does not constitute legal advice. If you are making decisions related to immigration or any legal matter, please consult a licensed attorney in your state of residence.