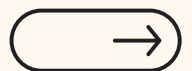




Family-Based Immigration: The Step-by-Step Relative Sponsorship Timeline

A Guide to How Your Petition Moves from Filing to Final Approval



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Welcome & Overview

Navigating the United States family-based immigration system can feel overwhelming. The journey involves multiple government agencies, extensive background checks, and precise timelines.

This resource guide outlines the typical journey of a family sponsorship petition, tracking its path from your initial filing with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) all the way to the final green card approval.

Important Note: Every immigration case is unique. Timelines fluctuate based on the sponsor's legal status (U.S. Citizen vs. Lawful Permanent Resident), the beneficiary's country of origin, and current government processing backlogs. This guide provides a structural roadmap of the process rather than a guarantee of specific processing times.

The 5 Core Phases of Relative Sponsorship

Phase 1: The Initial Filing (USCIS)

The journey officially begins when the sponsor files the initial petition to establish a qualifying family relationship.

- **Step 1: Form I-130 Submission**
 - The U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident (sponsor) submits Form I-130, a family-based immigrant petition, along with supporting financial and relationship documentation to USCIS.
- **Step 2: Receipt Notice (Form I-797C)**
 - Within a few weeks, USCIS issues a Form I-797C, Notice of Action, confirming they received the application. This notice contains your unique Receipt Number, which allows you to track your status online, and establishes your Priority Date.
- **Step 3: Background & Security Checks**
 - USCIS performs extensive background checks on both the sponsor and the relative. If more information is needed, they may issue a Request for Evidence (RFE), which requires a timely response to prevent delays.
- **Step 4: Form I-130 Approval**
 - Once USCIS is satisfied that a valid relationship exists, the petition is approved. Note: An approved I-130 establishes the relationship, but it does not grant legal status or a green card by itself.

Phase 2: Transition to the National Visa Center (NVC)

Once USCIS approves the petition, the case moves from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to the Department of State (DOS).

- **Step 5: NVC Intake & Case Creation**
 - USCIS transfers the approved file to the National Visa Center (NVC). The NVC creates a new case number and sends the applicant welcome instructions.
- **Step 6: Fee Payments & Document Submission**
 - The applicant pays the immigrant visa application fee and the Affidavit of Support fee online.
 - The sponsor submits financial documents (Form I-864), and the applicant submits civil documents (e.g., birth certificates, police certificates).



Phase 3: The Visa Bulletin & Priority Dates

Depending on your category, you may have to wait for an immigrant visa number to become available.

- **Immediate Relatives:** Spouses, unmarried children (under 21), and parents of U.S. citizens are not subject to annual numerical caps. Their timeline proceeds immediately to Phase 4 once Phase 2 documents are qualified.
- **Preference Categories:** Siblings, adult children, or relatives of Lawful Permanent Residents face annual numerical limits. They must track the monthly DOS Visa Bulletin until their Priority Date becomes "current" before an interview can be scheduled.

Phase 4: Final Processing & The Interview

This phase differs based on where the sponsored relative currently resides.

- **Pathway A: Consular Processing (Relative is Outside the U.S.)**
 - The NVC schedules an interview at the designated U.S. Embassy or Consulate in the relative's home country.
 - The relative completes a mandatory immigration medical examination with an authorized panel physician.
 - The relative attends the interview, bringing all original civil documents.
- **Pathway B: Adjustment of Status (Relative is Inside the U.S.)**
 - If the relative is already legally inside the U.S. and eligible, they submit Form I-485 to adjust status.
 - They attend a local USCIS field office for a biometrics appointment (fingerprints and photos) and an interview, if required.

Phase 5: Final Approval & Welcoming

- **Step 7: Visa Issuance or Status Adjustment**
 - **Consular:** The visa is stamped into the relative's passport, allowing them to enter the U.S. as a Lawful Permanent Resident.
 - **Adjustment:** The Form I-485 is approved, changing their status directly.
- **Step 8: Receiving the Green Card**
 - The physical Permanent Resident Card (Green Card) is mailed to the relative's U.S. address, officially completing the journey!

Key Takeaways for Families

- **Accuracy Prevents Delays:** Simple typographical errors or missing signatures can delay a case by months or cause an outright rejection.
- **Keep Addresses Updated:** The government communicates primarily via physical mail. Always report an address change within 10 days to avoid missing crucial notices.
- **Beware of Scams:** Only trust official communications from USCIS, the NVC, or your retained legal counsel. Avoid "Notarios" or unaccredited consultants making false promises.



Need Personalized Guidance?

Family immigration law is complex, and timelines vary significantly based on your specific circumstances. At Gonzalez Law Offices, we are committed to helping families understand their options and confidently navigate the legal framework.

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