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Most Green Card Applicants Must Leave the Country Under Major Trump Immigration Shift

Foreign nationals seeking permanent residency must leave the country and apply through U.S. consulates abroad except in “extraordinary circumstances,” a major immigration shift critics warn could disrupt workers, families and legal visa holders.

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The Trump administration has announced a major immigration policy shift that would require most foreign nationals living temporarily in the United States to leave the country and apply for green cards from abroad, a move that could affect workers, families, students, and other immigrants seeking permanent residency.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services announced Friday that it had issued a new policy memo instructing that “adjustment of status” should be granted only in “extraordinary circumstances.” The agency said foreign nationals in the U.S. temporarily who want permanent residency should generally return to their home countries and apply through the State Department’s consular process.

The Department of Homeland Security promoted the change in a post on X, stating, “An alien who is in the U.S. temporarily and wants a Green Card must return to their home country to apply.”

DHS said the policy allows the immigration system “to function as the law intended instead of incentivizing loopholes,” adding, “The era of abusing our nation’s immigration system is over.”

The change targets adjustment of status, a long-standing process that has allowed eligible applicants already in the United States to seek lawful permanent residency without leaving the country. USCIS’ own public guidance describes adjustment of status as the process used to apply for a green card while inside the U.S., while consular processing is used by applicants outside the country.

The administration says the new policy restores the original intent of immigration law and prevents temporary visa holders from using in-country green card applications to remain in the United States for extended periods.

But immigration attorneys, employers, and advocacy groups are expected to argue that adjustment of status is not a loophole, but a lawful process created by Congress and used for decades by people who are eligible for permanent residency. The shift could create particular problems for H-1B workers, O-1 visa holders, spouses of U.S. citizens, and applicants from countries with long visa backlogs.

Critics also warn that requiring applicants to leave the U.S. could separate families, disrupt employment, and place some vulnerable immigrants at risk, particularly if they are required to return to countries they fled or where U.S. consular services are limited.

The policy includes room for case-by-case discretion in “extraordinary circumstances,” but the administration has not yet made clear how narrowly that exception will be applied.

The move is part of a broader Trump administration effort to tighten immigration benefits processing, increase scrutiny of applicants, and narrow pathways that allow foreign nationals to remain in the United States while immigration cases are pending.

Legal challenges are likely, especially because federal law has long allowed certain eligible people who were inspected and admitted or paroled into the United States to apply for adjustment of status if they meet statutory requirements.

For now, the policy marks one of the administration’s most consequential changes to legal immigration processing, shifting many applicants from an in-country process to a consular system abroad that is already affected by delays, backlogs, and country-specific complications.