

BY ALEXIS GRANT : The Herald-Sun Washington Bureau
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WASHINGTON -- Triangle residents are getting their own immigration office -- in Raleigh.

The office will open in September 2006, meaning a visit to immigration officials will be easier for many North Carolinians. Currently residents must travel to Charlotte for immigration services.

The U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services Thursday announced the creation of the new office.

"Everybody will be welcoming this news," said Andrea Bazan-Manson, executive director of El Pueblo Inc., a Latino-advocacy organization in Raleigh. "It will help people stuck in this backlog get processed quicker."

No site has been selected for the office, which will have a staff of about 20.

Rep. David Price, D-4th District, who for years has been pushing for a Raleigh office, got the word from CIS Director Eduardo Aguirre Jr. during a Homeland Security Appropriations subcommittee hearing.

"It's much more convenient," Price said. "When they have business with the immigration service, they're not going to have to take a full day off -- a three-and-a-half hour drive each way is not easy."

In 1997, Price started receiving complaints from constituents who had to travel to Charlotte to file immigration paperwork and meet with officials. Last June he wrote Aguirre, requesting a comparison of the number of immigrants in North Carolina and the distribution of offices. That study, he predicted, would show a need for another CIS office.

The comparison has not yet been made, but when Aguirre announced the need for the Raleigh office, Price said, "He said he already knew from looking at the numbers that they would be sufficient to justify a new office."

Manson said adding a Raleigh office demonstrates that Washington understands the need to speed the process, and predicted it would be followed by significant immigration reform.

Latinos comprise about 8 percent of the Durham population, according to the 2000 census.