



PRACTICE ADVISORY¹
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LITIGATION FOR BUSINESS IMMIGRATION PRACTITIONERS

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I. Introduction

Filing suit can be a powerful tool that can prompt U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to issue an approval notice soon after the complaint is filed or to obtain a judicial decision holding that USCIS was wrong as a matter of law. This Practice Advisory provides information practitioners need to assess whether a lawsuit in federal court is the right option for a client that has reached its limit with USCIS’ overly restrictive interpretations of legal requirements, shifting adjudications standards and general lack of transparency in decision-making.

This Practice Advisory addresses federal court challenges to an erroneous business-related USCIS decision under the Administrative Procedure Act (APA), 5 U.S.C. § 701 *et seq.*, the Declaratory Judgment Act, 28 U.S.C. § 2201, and/or the Mandamus and Venue Act of 1962, 28 U.S.C. § 1361. The APA is the most commonly used cause of action to overturn an agency decision that is contrary to statutes or regulations, as it provides far-reaching injunctive relief. The Declaratory Judgment Act can be used to obtain a court order stating that a particular action by USCIS violates the applicable law or regulations. The Mandamus and Venue Act can be used to obtain an order requiring USCIS to adjudicate a petition or application that has been pending for an unreasonably long time—but not to order the agency to make a particular decision. The Council has additional advisories—referenced throughout—which expand upon many of the topics discussed here. Attorneys considering federal litigation for the first time are encouraged to review all the relevant advisories.

II. A Solid Administrative Record is a Litigation Prerequisite

Judicial review under the APA generally is limited to the administrative record that was before the agency when it made its decision. *Citizens to Pres. Overton Park, Inc. v. Volpe*, 401 U.S. 402, 414, 420 (1971), *abrogated on other grounds by Califano v. Sanders*, 430 U.S. 99, 105 (1977); *see also Camp v. Pitts*, 411 U.S. 138, 142 (1973) (“[T]he focal point for judicial review [in an APA suit] should be the administrative record already in existence, not some new record made initially in the reviewing court.”).

The primary exceptions to this rule are when there is no administrative record for the court to review or the record is insufficient with respect to the claims in the suit. Such an incomplete record may “frustrate effective judicial review,” *Camp*, 411 U.S. at 142-43, and the court may expand review beyond the record or permit discovery. If plaintiff asserts that documents are missing from the record, then it must present “reasonable, non-speculative grounds demonstrating” the decisionmaker directly or indirectly considered the documents. *WildEarth Guardians v. Salazar*, 670 F. Supp. 2d 1, 6 (D.D.C. 2009).² If plaintiff seeks to include “extra-

² *Treez, Inc. v. U.S. Dep’t of Homeland Sec.* is a rare example of a successful motion to compel supplementation to complete the certified administrative record in a lawsuit challenging the denial of an amended H-1B petition. No. 22-cv-7027, 2023 WL 4240142 (N.D. Cal. June 27, 2023), *magistrate’s order aff’d*, 2023 WL 4846164 (N.D. Cal. July 28, 2023). After initially

record evidence,” meaning material that was not initially before the agency, the plaintiff must demonstrate one of the following: 1) the agency “deliberately or negligently excluded” documents possibly adverse to its decision, 2) additional “background information” is necessary to decide if “the agency considered all the relevant factors,” or 3) the agency “failed to explain administrative action so as to frustrate judicial review.” *City of Dania Beach v. Fed. Aviation Admin.*, 628 F.3d 581, 590 (D.C. Cir. 2010) (internal citation and quotation marks omitted). *See also Open Soc’y Inst. v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, 573 F. Supp. 3d 294, 307 (D.D.C. 2021) (discussing the difference between supplementing to add missing records versus extra-record information).³

Despite these narrow exceptions, the court ordinarily will decide the legality of USCIS’ decision based on the record before the agency, and an attorney cannot supplement that record to strengthen a client’s position during litigation. Thus, a solid record in support of the immigration benefit is critical. Practitioners should prepare the petition and supporting evidence with an understanding of the statutory and regulatory requirements for the immigrant or nonimmigrant classification or other benefit.

approving an H-1B petition for a Director of Development Operations for a software services employer, USCIS denied an amended petition to change the worksite location, asserting that the worker’s services were “illegal” because the employer’s clients included state-legal cannabis companies. 2023 WL 4240142, at *1. Plaintiffs sought to include (a) internal documents relating to the denial and (b) documents related to decisions on H-1B petitions filed by similarly-situated employers. *Id.* at *2. Plaintiffs maintained that in denying the amended petition USCIS had changed its position or enacted a “new rule.” *Id.* at *1. Applying “this District’s law,” the court concluded that by showing an absence of internal documents, plaintiffs had sufficiently identified what was missing from the record and ordered the government to either produce internal deliberative materials “concerning the petitions and rule change at issue” or provide a privilege log for any documents withheld. *Id.* at *4-5. The court also ordered the government to produce “materials concerning past adjudications of similarly situated petitions and any departure from those petitions or their past policy,” given plaintiffs’ claims of a policy change and possible new rule. *Id.* at *5.

³ The Ninth Circuit appears to conflate the distinction between material considered by the agency but not in the record and material not initially considered. Its “extra-record exceptions” include: 1) if “necessary to determine whether the agency has considered all relevant factors and has explained its decision,” 2) if “the agency has relied on documents not in the record,” 3) if “necessary to explain technical terms or complex subject matter,” or 4) if plaintiff shows “agency bad faith.” *Lands Council v. Powell*, 395 F.3d 1019, 1030 (9th Cir. 2005) (internal citation and quotation marks omitted). Deliberative documents (i.e., documents prepared to assist the decisionmaker in reaching a decision) generally are not part of the administrative record. *Blue Mountain Biodiversity Project v. Jeffries*, 72 F.4th 991, 997 (9th Cir. 2023); *Oceana, Inc. v. Ross*, 920 F.3d 855, 865 (D.C. Cir. 2019). However, if the plaintiff demonstrates “bad faith or improper conduct,” a district court might order the agency to produce a privilege log to enable the court to determine if the documents were properly withheld as deliberative. *Jeffries*, 72 F.4th at 997 (quoting *Oceana*, 920 F.3d at 865)).

Additionally, the source of the evidence provided will affect the weight the decision maker gives in assessing veracity. The petitioner must present all relevant facts about the petitioner and the beneficiary (in the petition and supporting documentation, which may include a petitioner letter). The attorney then can discuss the law and apply the statutory and regulatory standards to the facts in a separate attorney letter or memorandum.

Read all Notices of Action thoroughly. When responding to a Request for Evidence, a Notice of Intent to Deny, or a Notice of Intent to Revoke, practitioners must answer each query, either by providing a complete response or stating why a particular query is unwarranted or irrelevant. If USCIS has made a false assumption in its query, such as asking for evidence of recruitment for the job when the petitioner is a multinational company seeking to transfer a manager from its foreign subsidiary, then identify the agency error and redirect the agency to the proper standard and the evidence that supports petition approval based on the petitioner's intended employment of the beneficiary. With gaps in the evidence, a court is more likely to find that USCIS' decision was reasonable. With a thorough response, a petitioner will have a much stronger foundation for demonstrating to the court that USCIS ignored or mischaracterized the evidence.

III. Deciding Whether to File a District Court Action

Several factors will influence a client's and attorney's decision about whether to challenge an agency decision in federal court. Initially, it is important to review the agency decision to identify the errors that might be challenged. For all denials, attorneys can compare the reasons USCIS asserted to the requirements in the applicable section(s) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) and regulations. Is the decision based on a legal error? Has USCIS tried to impose a requirement that does not exist? For example, did USCIS violate the statute and regulations when it denied an H-1B petition because the agency erroneously decided that the job offered was not in a specialty occupation because there was no "specifically tailored and titled degree program" typically available to enter the field?⁴ Or, is the issue a factual one? For example, has USCIS erroneously stated that the beneficiary does not have the degree required by the employer for an H-1B specialty occupation when a copy of the beneficiary's diploma was submitted with the petition? Finally, was the decision based upon the exercise of discretion? If so, there may be a jurisdictional bar to the court's review under 8 U.S.C. § 1252(a)(2)(B).⁵

Generally, in a mandamus or APA unreasonable delay action, there will be no decision to review since the issue usually is the agency's delay in deciding. In such a case, the primary considerations will be the length of time that the agency has delayed and whether it is outside of the normal processing time.

When reviewing the strength of the record presented to USCIS or the legal errors that the agency may have committed, weigh the likelihood of making "bad law" if the court rules against the client. Remember that when a federal court reviews a denial, the court is not deciding whether USCIS made the best decision or the same decision the court would have reached—only whether

⁴ See *Chung Song Ja Corp. v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, 96 F. Supp. 3d 1191, 1198 (W.D. Wash. 2015).

⁵ See *infra* § V.A.

USCIS’ decision was correct legally and whether it acted reasonably in denying the petition based on the evidence presented.

IV. Factors to Consider Before Filing Suit

A. Exhaustion of Administrative Remedies

Generally, before seeking federal court review of an agency’s decision, a party must exhaust all administrative remedies. Otherwise, the court may find that it has no jurisdiction or otherwise refuse to review the decision. For this reason, lawyers often ask whether they must appeal to USCIS’ Administrative Appeals Office (AAO) before filing suit in federal court.

With the exception of the EB-5 immigrant investor category, exhaustion is not required when the APA is the basis for challenging a denial of an employment-based visa petition,⁶ as articulated by *Darby v. Cisneros*, 509 U.S. 137 (1993). In *Darby*, the Supreme Court held that in federal court cases brought under the APA, a plaintiff can be required to exhaust only administrative remedies that are mandated by either a statute or regulation—establishing a major exception to the exhaustion requirement. *Id.* at 153-54.

Courts applied *Darby* and concluded that petitioners were not required to appeal to the AAO the denial of the following types of employment-based petitions because no statute or regulation mandates an administrative appeal. *See Amin v. Mayorkas*, 24 F.4th 383, 390 (5th Cir. 2022) (extraordinary ability (EB-1) petition); *RELX, Inc. v. Baran*, 397 F. Supp. 3d 41, 50 (D.D.C. 2019) (H-1B petition denial); *Ore v. Clinton*, 675 F. Supp. 2d 217, 223-24 (D. Mass. 2009) (L-1A petition denial).⁷

In recent years, USCIS is more likely to move to dismiss for lack of a final decision (*see infra* § IV.B), than to claim that the plaintiff failed to exhaust by not appealing to the AAO. However,

⁶ In the EB-5 Reform and Integrity Act of 2022, Congress specified that USCIS “shall provide” for AAO review of various determinations in the immigrant investor category, including a petition for immigrant investor status (Forms I-526 & I-526E) and that exhaustion of “all administrative appeals” is a prerequisite to judicial review. 8 U.S.C. § 1153(b)(5)(P)(i)-(ii). This exhaustion requirement likely applies to petitions for immigrant investor status filed before, but denied on or after the Act’s effective date of March 15, 2022, since the statute did not exclude earlier-filed petitions from AAO review. *See id.* Congress also barred judicial review of certain types of discretionary decisions by the DHS Secretary. *See* 8 U.S.C. § 1153(b)(5)(N)(i), (N)(v) (relating to threats to public safety or national security, with limited appellate review); 8 U.S.C. § 1153(b)(5)(O)(i) (fraud, deceit, intentional material misrepresentation, or criminal misuse).

⁷ *See also Bangura v. Hansen*, 434 F.3d 487, 498 (6th Cir. 2006) (per *Darby*, no statutory or regulatory mandate requiring administrative appeal of spousal immigrant visa petition denial before filing APA action in federal court). *Contra ASP, Inc. v. Holder*, No. 5:12-CV-50-BO, 2012 WL 13055190, at *2-3 (E.D.N.C. Dec. 11, 2012) (finding regulation for appeal of I-140 denial mandatory so *Darby* exception did not apply; disregarding permissive language in 8 C.F.R. §§ 103.3(a)(1)(iii)(A) (“may be appealed”) & 204.5(n)(2) (“right to appeal”).

if the government raises failure to exhaust, practitioners can explain why exhaustion is not required under *Darby*, relying both on the relevant immigration cases and non-immigration cases within the same circuit that have found that the *Darby* exception applies in similar contexts. See the Council Practice Advisory, [*Failure to Appeal to the AAO: Does It Bar All Federal Court Review of the Case?*](#) (Sept. 26, 2016) (explaining in more detail the *Darby* holding and citing both immigration and non-immigration cases from different circuits).

An appeal to the AAO can delay a case considerably, particularly when the result is that the AAO simply rubberstamps the decision below. Another concern is that the AAO may affirm the denial on a different ground that would be more difficult to overcome than the original denial.

Despite these concerns, one practical reason to appeal to the AAO is that—unlike in an APA challenge in federal court—a petitioner *can* supplement the record before the AAO. See 8 C.F.R. § 103.3(a)(1)(iii)(C); AAO Practice Manual § 3.8 (“Appellants may . . . submit a supplemental brief or additional evidence.”). When reviewing a denial, practitioners should consider whether additional evidence would significantly improve the likelihood of prevailing in an administrative appeal or in court if the AAO ultimately dismisses the appeal. See, e.g., *In re: 10165424*, 2020 WL 9174053, at *1 (AAO Aug. 24, 2020) (petitioner submitted additional evidence and the AAO concluded the record satisfied the fourth regulatory test for, and met the statutory definition of, a specialty occupation); *In re: 9501201*, 2020 WL 9173990, at *1 (AAO Aug. 13, 2020) (petitioner submitted additional documentation with its appeal brief with the same result). If so, this might be a reason to consider an administrative appeal to the AAO.

B. Final Agency Action

The APA also requires that the challenged agency decision be “final.” 5 U.S.C. § 704; see also *Darby v. Cisneros*, 509 U.S. 137, 144-45 (1993) (distinguishing between doctrines of finality and exhaustion of administrative remedies). A decision is final when a “decisionmaker has arrived at a definitive position on the issue that inflicts an actual, concrete injury.” *Id.* at 144 (internal citation omitted). An agency action generally is considered final if the action is “the consummation of the agency’s decisionmaking process” and either determines “the [parties’] rights or obligations” or is the action “from which legal consequences flow.” *Bennett v. Spear*, 520 U.S. 154, 177-78 (1997) (internal quotation marks and citations omitted).

In most cases, a USCIS decision denying a petition (or application) will be a final decision under this standard. This is true even where proceedings are ongoing. For example, the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals reversed the dismissal of an APA action challenging USCIS’ denial of a nonimmigrant (L-1A) visa petition, concluding that removal proceedings against the beneficiary could not change the finality of the denial where the immigration judge lacked jurisdiction to adjudicate the visa petition. *Canal A Media Holding, LLC v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, 964 F.3d 1250, 1255-56 (11th Cir. 2020).

However, several courts have held that the agency’s decision was not “final” when there was a pending administrative appeal. In these family-based immigration cases, the courts refused to apply the *Darby* exception where a party pursued an optional administrative appeal to the Board of Immigration Appeals and then also filed an APA action while the administrative appeal remained pending. See, e.g., *Bangura*, 434 F.3d at 501; *Ma v. Reno*, 114 F.3d 128, 130

(9th Cir. 1997); *Naik v. Renaud*, 947 F. Supp. 2d 464, 472 (D.N.J. 2013), *aff'd*, 575 F. Appx. 88 (3d Cir. 2014). Presumably, if the party had only filed suit without taking an administrative appeal, the courts in these cases would not have been able to require exhaustion, per *Darby*, since administrative review was optional. Because the administrative review was underway, however, each court dismissed the suit on the basis that there was not yet a “final” agency decision.

Applying the same reasoning, a court would likely find that a USCIS decision on an employment-based petition was not final if an AAO appeal was pending at the time an APA suit was filed.⁸

Unlike USCIS, the Department of Labor (DOL) specifies that a failure to timely request administrative review of a labor certification application denial “constitutes a failure to exhaust administrative remedies.” 20 C.F.R. § 656.24(e)(3). DOL also specifies that while a review request remains pending before the Board of Alien Labor Certification Appeals (BALCA), a new application “in the same occupation for the same [noncitizen]” cannot be filed. 20 C.F.R. § 656.24(e)(6). However, a district court rejected DOL’s claim that the court would lose jurisdiction if it ordered BALCA to “stay entry of its final judgment” until the court issued a final order as to whether the labor certification denial violated the APA. *Hsaio v. Stewart*, 527 F. Supp. 3d 1237, 1245 (D. Haw. 2021).⁹ A stay would maintain the status quo without reopening the application to agency review. *Id.* at 1246.

USCIS sometimes reopens a case that it denied while the federal court action is pending. The agency then argues that the court lacks jurisdiction because the decision is no longer final so the petitioner cannot seek APA review. When the agency requests additional information—even minimally—courts have accepted the government’s position. In an unpublished decision, one appellate court upheld the district court’s grant of summary judgment to USCIS after USCIS *sua sponte* reopened the H-1B petition denial and issued a request for evidence. *See 6801 Realty Co. v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, 719 F. Appx. 58, 61 (2d Cir. 2018). Finding that the agency had identified issues “that warranted further evidentiary development,” the court concluded that

⁸ In *Stellar IT Sols., Inc. v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, a successful preliminary injunction motion averted dismissal even though an AAO appeal was pending. No. 18-2015 (RC), 2018 WL 6047413 (D.D.C. Nov. 19, 2018). The court found that the finality of an H-1B petition denial was unaffected by the appeal since it had injured the beneficiary by placing him out of status. *Id.* at *10 n.4. The court invoked the “nonjurisdictional exhaustion” doctrine to proceed with the preliminary injunction despite the pending AAO appeal because it found “irreparable injury” to the beneficiary from the loss of status. *Id.* at *5.

⁹ When the beneficiary of the labor certification application filed the complaint, the district court initially dismissed for lack of standing. *Id.* at 1243. The beneficiary appealed and sought emergency relief to stay entry of BALCA’s final judgment, which the Ninth Circuit granted. *Id.* Since that order is not available, it is unknown whether the Ninth Circuit also considered the finality issue. The Ninth Circuit then ruled that the beneficiary had standing, vacating the dismissal, and remanding to the district court. *Hsaio v. Scalia*, 821 F. App’x 680 (9th Cir. 2020). *See infra* § V.D for more information on standing to sue. After remand, the beneficiary sought the same preliminary relief from the district court.

the reopening “nullified the prior denial and left nothing for the district court to review.” *Id.* at 60.

A few federal district courts have dismissed for lack of jurisdiction complaints challenging H-1B petition denials on USCIS’ motion after USCIS reopened and issued a new RFE. In each case, the court considered the request to be for information other than the evidence the agency considered when it denied the petition. *See Utah Life Real Estate Group, LLC v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, 259 F. Supp. 3d 1294, 1296-97, 1300 (D. Utah 2017) (USCIS reopened and requested “additional information” after suit filed, petitioner refused to respond to this second RFE or stipulate to litigation stay; USCIS denied again while motion to dismiss pending, partly due to no RFE response); *Net-Inspect, LLC v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, No. C14-1514JLR, 2015 WL 880956, at *2, 4-5 (W.D. Wash. Mar. 2, 2015) (USCIS issued third RFE requesting “additional information” thirty days after suit filed; petitioner filed for summary judgment before the agency moved to dismiss but also responded to the RFE while maintaining that the required evidence was in the record before USCIS denied the petition); *True Capital Mgmt., LLC v. U.S. Dep’t of Homeland Sec.*, No. 13-261 JSC, 2013 WL 3157904, at *1, 4 (N.D. Cal. June 20, 2013) (USCIS sua sponte reopened and “sought additional evidence” in a second RFE after suit filed). The *Net-Inspect* court acknowledged that its decision “might very well be different” if the agency was found to be avoiding judicial review through “repeatedly reopening” its decision. 2015 WL 880956, at *6 n.7.

In *Utah Life*, the court held that the APA’s finality requirement was jurisdictional and thus it dismissed for lack of subject matter jurisdiction. 259 F. Supp. 3d at 1299-1300. For this reason, the court also rejected Utah Life’s request that it be permitted to amend its complaint to challenge USCIS’ second denial of the H-1B petition. *See id.* at 1299.

In contrast, however, a number of courts have held that the APA’s finality requirement is *not* jurisdictional or have left the question open.¹⁰ But in *6801 Realty*, the federal district court

¹⁰ *See, e.g., Dhakal v. Sessions*, 895 F.3d 532, 538, 541 (7th Cir. 2018) (APA finality not jurisdictional; lack of finality decided on the merits); *Jama v. Dep’t of Homeland Sec.*, 760 F.3d 490, 494 & n.4 (6th Cir. 2014) (elements of an APA claim, including finality, are not jurisdictional); *Vietnam Veterans of Am. v. Shinseki*, 599 F.3d 654, 661 (D.C. Cir. 2010) (and cases cited therein) (“We think the proposition that the review provisions of the APA are not jurisdictional is now firmly established.”); *Long Term Care Partners, LLC v. United States*, 516 F.3d 225, 232 (4th Cir. 2008) (assuming, without deciding, that under Supreme Court precedent for determining whether requirements are jurisdictional, the APA finality rule is not); *R.I. Dep’t of Envtl. Mgmt. v. United States*, 304 F.3d 31, 40 (1st Cir. 2002) (APA finality requirement is not a jurisdictional issue); *see also Iowa League of Cities v. EPA*, 711 F.3d 844, 863 n.12 (8th Cir. 2013) (*dicta*, APA finality requirement not jurisdictional). *Contra Elldakli v. Garland*, 64 F.4th 666, 670-71 (5th Cir.), *cert. denied*, No. 23-115, 2023 WL 8531894 (2023) (if nonfinal, APA action dismissed for lack of jurisdiction); *Canal A Media Holding*, 964 F.3d at 1255 (same in Eleventh Circuit); *Or. Nat. Desert Ass’n v. U.S. Forest Serv.*, 465 F.3d 977, 982 (9th Cir. 2006) (quoting *Ukiah Valley Med. Ctr. v. Fed. Trade Comm’n*, 911 F.2d 261, 264 n.1 (9th Cir. 1990) (“[APA] finality is . . . a jurisdictional requirement”)); *Air Espana v. Brien*, 165 F.3d 148, 152 (2d Cir. 1999) (finality requirement is jurisdictional). More recently, the Second

denied USCIS' motion to dismiss for lack of subject matter jurisdiction, declining to resolve the "open question" in the Second Circuit as to whether the APA's finality requirement is jurisdictional. 719 F. Appx. at 59 n.1. This approach allowed the appellate court to review whether the district court correctly decided, as a matter of law, that the decision was no longer final. Without a final decision, the plaintiff would not have a claim that the APA was intended to protect.¹¹

One district court rejected USCIS' nonfinality claim, concluding that the reopening of an H-1B petition was "highly suspect and contrary to the [agency's] regulations." *RELX, Inc. v. Baran*, 397 F. Supp. 3d 41, 53 (D.D.C. 2019). Plaintiffs received notice that USCIS had reopened and issued an RFE on the same day plaintiffs filed their summary judgment motion per the court's expedited briefing schedule and shortly after defendants moved to dismiss. *Id.* at 47, 51. The court gave three reasons why reopening did not affect finality. First, USCIS did not issue a motion to reopen as 8 C.F.R. § 103.5(a)(5)(ii) requires. *Id.* at 51.¹² Second, USCIS did not provide any reason for reopening other than the lawsuit. *Id.* at 52. Third, but most significant, USCIS did not request new evidence. *Id.* The court described the request as "nearly identical" to information the agency had requested and reviewed before denying the H-1B petition. *Id.*

RELX is a rare example where the government failed to offer even minimal justification for reopening. In *Mantena v. Hazuda*, a similar outlier, USCIS moved to dismiss for nonfinality after it reopened an employment-based application to adjust status to permanent resident for the third time. No. 17-cv-5142, 2018 WL 3745668, at *2-3 (S.D.N.Y. Aug. 7, 2018).¹³ Distinguishing *6801 Realty*, the court concluded that the agency had reopened "in name only," having requested no new evidence or mentioning anything to investigate. *Id.* at *6. The court also found the "circumstances of reopening [] suspect," occurring only nine days after plaintiff had filed her second amended complaint. *Id.* In *72andSunny Partners, LLC v. Mayorkas*, the court denied a motion to dismiss for nonfinality when USCIS reopened an extraordinary ability immigrant petition and issued a Notice of Intent to Deny (NOID). No. 2:22-cv-4465, 2022 WL 19076655, at *2-3 (C.D. Cal. Dec. 6, 2022). Quoting *RELX*, the court found that USCIS' failure to provide an explanation appeared to be a reopening "in name only." *Id.* But after ostensibly finding that USCIS had no basis to reopen, the court then stayed the lawsuit and set a deadline for the agency to complete the "reopened review." *Id.* But the court in *Tsysar v. Mayorkas*, dismissed the

Circuit recognized that later Supreme Court precedent raised questions about whether finality is jurisdictional but did not need to resolve the issue to decide the case presented. *See, e.g., Manchanda v. Lewis*, No. 21-1088-cv, 2021 WL 5986877, at *5 n.4 (2d Cir. Dec. 17, 2021); *Sharkey v. Quarantillo*, 541 F.3d 75, 87-88 (2d Cir. 2008).

¹¹ *See infra* § V.D, for more information on standing to sue.

¹² In contrast, both *Net-Inspect* and *True Capital* cited the reopening regulation as support for the agency's action, disagreeing that USCIS first had to issue a motion. *See* 2015 WL 880956, at *5; 2013 WL 3157904, at *3. Instead, both courts also relied on 8 C.F.R. § 103.2(b)(8)(iii), which they read as permitting the agency to ask for additional evidence before deciding whether to change its initial decision. *Id.*

¹³ After *Patel v. Garland*, 596 U.S. 328 (2022), the district court likely would have dismissed for lack of subject matter jurisdiction. *See infra* § V.A.2. However, *Hazuda* is included as the court's reasoning for rejecting reopening may be helpful to practitioners.

lawsuit after USCIS reopened an extraordinary ability immigrant petition and issued a NOID. No. 22-cv-22372, 2022 WL 17250333, at *1 (S.D. Fla. Nov. 23, 2022). The court concluded that the sua sponte reopening, plus the opportunity to “cure defects” afforded by the NOID, met the regulatory requirement for reopening and was done in good faith. *Id.* at *4. The court dismissed without prejudice to plaintiff filing another complaint after “entry of a final agency action.” *Id.* at *5.

While USCIS does not always reopen a denial after a plaintiff files a federal action, attorneys need to advise their clients of the possibility that they will be back before the agency. If a court decides to dismiss for lack of finality, attorneys should consider asking the court to retain jurisdiction. If the APA’s finality requirement is only a statutory limitation on review, then the court could retain the case so that the client can seek relief without refile if the agency upholds the denial.¹⁴

C. Timing

When a civil cause of action against the government is not subject to a separate statute of limitations, the general six-year limitation in 28 U.S.C. § 2401(a) applies. Where the issue has arisen, courts have applied the general limit to the APA, which does not have a statute of limitations, including in the immigration law context. *See Mendoza v. Perez*, 754 F.3d 1002, 1018 (D.C. Cir. 2014); *Nagahi v. Immigr. & Naturalization Serv.*, 219 F.3d 1166, 1171 (10th Cir. 2000).

V. Preparing the Complaint

A. Subject Matter Jurisdiction

In an APA case for the review of agency action, subject matter jurisdiction is based on 28 U.S.C. § 1331, the “federal question” statute. *Califano v. Sanders*, 430 U.S. 99, 105 (1977).¹⁵ Although the APA does not confer jurisdiction but instead serves as a cause of action (*see infra* § V.C), attorneys often list it in the jurisdictional section of a complaint because it also provides a waiver

¹⁴ *See Gracious Ark Church v. United States*, No. CV 12-3990 GAF (SSx), 2013 WL 12064271, at *7 (C.D. Cal. May 15, 2013) (staying case pending final agency action after court concluded agency action no longer final; AAO sua sponte reopened denials of religious worker and spouse’s applications to adjust status to lawful permanent resident while cross-motions for summary judgment pending). The plaintiff may need to file an amended complaint if USCIS asserts new reasons to deny rather than simply affirming its prior decision. In *Castillo Castillo v. Jaddou*, the court dismissed as moot a lawsuit challenging the denial of an E-2 investor petition after USCIS reopened and vacated the initial decision rendering it nonfinal, issued a request for evidence to which petitioner responded, and issued a denial on a different ground. No. 22-CV-81692-RAR, 2022 WL 5015433, at *1, 3 (S.D. Fla. Aug. 6, 2023). Plaintiffs did not seek leave to file an amended complaint and instead argued exceptions to the mootness doctrine. *Id.* at *2-4.

¹⁵ *See also Bowen v. Massachusetts*, 487 U.S. 879, 891 n.16 (1988); *ANA Int’l Inc. v. Way*, 393 F.3d 886, 890 (9th Cir. 2004) (“default rule” that agency actions are reviewable under federal question jurisdiction applies in the immigration context).

of sovereign immunity that allows a party to sue the federal government over unlawful agency action for non-monetary damages. *See Bowen*, 487 U.S. at 891-92 (undisputed that Congress intended to expand judicial review of agency action by amending § 702 to eliminate sovereign immunity defense). Such a waiver is necessary for the court to exercise jurisdiction. *See Fed. Deposit Ins. Corp. v. Meyer*, 510 U.S. 471, 475 (1994) (“[S]overeign immunity is jurisdictional in nature.”).

The APA is not available as a cause of action to the extent that another statute precludes judicial review. *See* 5 U.S.C. § 701(a)(1). Since the INA contains provisions that bar judicial review, attorneys should confirm that the client’s claims do not fall within these provisions.

1. Application of the bar to judicial review of discretionary decisions to denials or revocations of certain employment-based petitions.

The government frequently asserts the bar on review of discretionary decisions, 8 U.S.C. § 1252(a)(2)(B)(ii). Importantly, most courts have held that statutory eligibility determinations are not discretionary and thus do not fall within the § 1252(a)(2)(B)(ii) bar to review of discretionary decisions. In most employment-based cases, the statutory eligibility requirements for visa classifications are sufficiently specific to overcome this threshold. *See, e.g., Fogo de Chao (Holdings) Inc. v. U.S. Dep’t of Homeland Sec.*, 769 F.3d 1127, 1138 (D.C. Cir. 2014) (no jurisdictional bar to challenging L-1B visa classification denial because the criteria for L-1B visa determinations are laid out in the statute, including specifically a definition of “specialized knowledge”); *Spencer Enters., Inc. v. United States*, 345 F.3d 683, 688 (9th Cir. 2003) (the statute setting forth eligibility requirements for immigrant investor visas provided meaningful standards to review petition denial)¹⁶; *Svelte Const., LLC v. Baran*, 368 F. Supp. 3d 1301, 1305 (D. Minn. 2019) (no jurisdictional bar to reviewing L-1A visa petition denial because “the relevant statute—8 U.S.C. § 1184(c)[(2)(C)]—states the Attorney General shall make a process for reviewing [L] petitions” and “there is no additional [statutory] language” giving discretion) (emphasis in original); *Hakamuddin v. Chertoff*, No. 4:08-cv-1261, 2008 WL8444770, at *3-4 (S.D. Tex. 2008) (“[T]he language of § 1184(c) does not grant the Attorney General discretionary authority to decide L-1 nonimmigrant status.”); *Evangelical Lutheran Church in Am. v. Immigr. & Naturalization Serv.*, 288 F. Supp. 2d 32, 41-42 (D.D.C. 2003), *appeal dismissed*, No. 03-5376, 2004 WL 434067 (D.C. Cir. Mar. 3, 2004) (no jurisdictional bar to reviewing denial of untimely filed H-1B petition).¹⁷

¹⁶ The EB-5 Reform and Integrity Act of 2022 requires a petitioner to exhaust administrative remedies before filing a lawsuit in federal district court to challenge the denial of an immigrant investor petition (Form I-526 or I-526E). 8 U.S.C. § 1153(b)(5)(P)(i)-(ii). This requirement likely applies to any immigrant investor petition denied since the Act took effect, even if filed earlier. *See supra* § IV.A & n.6.

¹⁷ The court in *Evangelical Lutheran Church* also rejected the government’s argument that because the regulation gives the agency discretion to decide whether to accept an untimely-filed petition, the court must dismiss for failure to state a claim upon which relief can be granted. 288 F. Supp. 2d at 45. The court explained that it could decide whether the agency had exercised its discretion or ignored that it had this discretion by denying solely because the petition was filed untimely. *Id.* A court may have subject matter jurisdiction but may still dismiss a lawsuit if

A few decisions have concluded that the denial of a nonimmigrant visa petition requesting an extension of status is a discretionary decision barred from judicial review by 8 U.S.C. § 1252(a)(2)(B)(ii). *See, e.g., CDI Info. Servs., Inc. v. Reno*, 278 F.3d 616, 619 (6th Cir. 2002) (court lacks jurisdiction to consider H-1B extension petition denial because 8 U.S.C. § 1184(a)(1) provides for nonimmigrant admissions under the terms and conditions “the Attorney General may by regulations prescribe” and 8 C.F.R. § 214.1(c)(5) “clearly confers discretion on the Service” by stating the extension “may be granted at the [agency’s] discretion”); *Mahaveer, Inc. v. Bushey*, No. 04-1275 (GK), 2006 WL 1716723, at *3-4 (D.D.C., June 19, 2006) (same, as to L-1A extension petition denial, but also relying on § 1184(c)(1) as conferring discretion for L admissions).

The Sixth Circuit’s decision arguably misreads 8 U.S.C. § 1184(a)(1). Authority to promulgate regulations does not equate with making the agency’s determinations as to eligibility for a particular visa classification unreviewable. As discussed above, several courts have found objective criteria exist in the INA and implementing regulations that make petition denials reviewable. The Sixth Circuit also failed to recognize that in adjudicating an H-1B petition with an extension request, USCIS must make two determinations: whether to approve the H-1B classification and whether to permit the foreign national to extend their stay in the United States, rather than apply for a visa abroad. Practitioners filing in the Sixth Circuit may consider distinguishing *CDI Info. Servs.* on this basis. For example, in *Residential Fin. Corp. v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, the court concluded that *CDI Info. Servs.* did not preclude it from having jurisdiction over an H-1B petition denial because it would be applying 8 U.S.C. § 1184 and the regulations at 8 C.F.R. § 214.2(h), which “have no explicit discretion component.” 839 F. Supp. 2d 985, 990-91 (S.D. Ohio 2012). *But see Glob. Exp./Imp. Link, Inc. v. U.S. Bureau of Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, 423 F. Supp. 2d 703, 705 (E.D. Mich. 2006) (an apparent outlier, deciding that the phrase “shall be determined by the Attorney General” in 8 U.S.C. § 1184(c)(1) “grants sufficient discretion” to bar the court from reviewing the agency’s denial of an L-1A petition).¹⁸

There are two types of employment-based immigrant petition decisions where the government has successfully asserted that 8 U.S.C. § 1252(a)(2)(B)(ii) bars judicial review of certain discretionary decisions. The first is the national interest waiver determination in the exceptional ability immigrant visa classification, which allows the Department of Homeland Security to waive, “when in the national interest,” the usual prerequisite that the immigrant petition must be filed by an employer who has received a certification from the Department of Labor on the foreign national’s behalf. 8 U.S.C. § 1153(b)(2)(B)(i).¹⁹ *See also* 8 U.S.C. § 1182(a)(5)(A). Four

the court cannot provide a remedy, which is one of the components of a plaintiff’s standing to sue. *See infra*. § V.D.

¹⁸ Practitioners may find helpful the discussion in *Shah v. Chertoff*, rejecting the construction of 8 U.S.C. § 1184(c)(1) in *Glob. Exp./Imp. Link* and *Mahaveer* and concluding that the text “does not plainly specify discretion.” No. 3:05-CV-1608, 2006 WL 2859375, at *4-6 (N.D. Tex. Oct. 5, 2006).

¹⁹ The statute includes a second clause providing a separate national interest waiver provision for doctors who work in “shortage areas or veterans facilities.” 8 U.S.C.

federal courts of appeals determined that by using “may” and “deems” in the statute, Congress left the decision to the agency’s discretion. *Flores v. Garland*, 72 F.4th 85, 89-90 (5th Cir. 2023); *Brasil v. Sec’y, Dep’t of Homeland Sec.*, 28 F.4th 1189, 1194 (11th Cir. 2022) (per curiam); *Poursina v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, 936 F.3d 868, 871 (9th Cir. 2019); *Zhu v. Gonzales*, 411 F.3d 292, 295 (D.C. Cir. 2005). See also *Mousavi v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, 828 F. Appx. 130, 132-33 (3d Cir. 2020) (unpublished, not precedent). The Ninth Circuit pointed out that the jurisdictional bar is based on whether Congress gave the agency discretionary authority and not whether the agency exercises some discretion in reaching its decision. *Poursina*, 936 F.3d at 871 (citing *Spencer Enters.*, 345 F.3d at 689).

The second is revocation of an immigrant visa petition: “The [DHS Secretary] may, at any time, for what he deems to be good and sufficient cause, revoke” an approved immigrant visa petition. 8 U.S.C. § 1155. Most of the federal appellate courts to consider the issue concluded that this phrase was evidence of congressional intent to make the decision discretionary.²⁰ Only the Ninth Circuit concluded that Congress provided an objective standard for judicial review by including the phrase “good and sufficient cause.” *ANA Int’l Inc. v. Way*, 393 F.3d 886, 893-94 (9th Cir. 2004).²¹ While it may seem strange that federal courts can review petition denials²² but

§ 1153(b)(2)(B)(ii). This waiver is not shielded from judicial review as Congress made the waiver mandatory if a doctor meets objective requirements in the waiver provision. *Id.* (“The Attorney General shall grant . . .”)

²⁰ See *Nouritajer v. Johnson*, 18 F.4th 85, 88-89 (2d Cir. 2021) (per curiam); *iTech US, Inc. v. Renaud*, 5 F.4th 59, 67-68 (D.C. Cir. 2021); *Polfliet v. Cuccinelli*, 955 F.3d 377, 382-83 (4th Cir. 2020); *Bernardo ex rel. M & K Eng’g, Inc. v. Johnson*, 814 F.3d 481, 484-86 (1st Cir. 2016); *Mehanna v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, 677 F.3d 312, 313 (6th Cir. 2012); *Green v. Napolitano*, 627 F.3d 1341, 1344-46 (10th Cir. 2010); *Abdelwahab v. Frazier*, 578 F.3d 817, 821 (8th Cir. 2009); *Ghanem v. Upchurch*, 481 F.3d 222, 224-25 (5th Cir. 2007); *Jilin Pharm. USA, Inc. v. Chertoff*, 447 F.3d 196, 204-05 (3d Cir. 2006); *El-Khader v. Monica*, 366 F.3d 562, 567 (7th Cir. 2004); see also *Sands v. U.S. Dep’t of Homeland Sec.*, 308 Fed. Appx. 418, 420 (11th Cir. 2009) (per curiam) (statute “explicitly” strips jurisdiction; no discussion of text).

²¹ While the *Poursina* decision distinguished the national interest waiver provision from the revocation provision, the panel also described the *ANA Int’l* decision as an “outlier.” 936 F.3d at 875.

²² In *Elldakli v. Garland*, the Fifth Circuit issued a puzzling decision affirming lack of subject matter jurisdiction over the denial of an employment-based immigrant petition (Form I-140) on the ground that USCIS adjustment of status decisions outside of the removal context were not final agency action. 64 F.4th 666, 669-71 (5th Cir.), cert. denied, No. 23-115, 2023 WL 8531894 (2023). USCIS adjudication of an employment-based immigrant petition is independent of the filing or adjudication of an adjustment of status application. See 8 U.S.C. §§ 1153(b)(1)-(3), 1255(a); 8 C.F.R. § 204.5(c), (n). A noncitizen seeking to become a lawful permanent resident based on employment in the first three preference categories must be the beneficiary of an approved I-140 immigrant petition (or a spouse or child derivative applicant) before USCIS will adjudicate an adjustment application (if the person is eligible to adjust status in the United States) or a consular officer will adjudicate an immigrant visa application. See 8 C.F.R.

not revocations, the majority of courts have found that Congress drew this distinction. But some courts have refused to extend the jurisdictional bar to lawsuits challenging procedural deficiencies or raising questions of law.²³

Whether USCIS revocation of a nonimmigrant visa petition is reviewable appears to depend on a district court’s construction of 8 U.S.C. § 1184. In *Parcha v. Cuccinelli*, the court concluded that no jurisdictional bar exists to challenge an H-1B petition revocation or unreasonable delay in adjudicating an H-1B petition, as the text of 8 U.S.C. § 1184 does not explicitly make either discretionary. No. 4:20-cv-015, 2020 WL 607103, at *6-7 (E.D. Tex. Feb. 7, 2020). *See also Morris v. Gonzales*, No. 06-cv-4383, 2007 WL 2740438, at *3-4 (E.D. Pa. Sept. 19, 2007) (8 U.S.C. § 1184(a)(1), which authorizes USCIS to set admission conditions, does not explicitly confer discretion to revoke; although the decision refers to “visa” revocation, USCIS had revoked the H-1B petition). However, if a district court construes § 1184(a)(1) like the Sixth Circuit did for extension denials, then the same bar would appear to foreclose review of revocations. *See CDI Info. Servs.*, 278 F.3d at 619.

2. Courts are applying *dicta* in *Patel v. Garland* to foreclose judicial review of employment-based adjustment of status applications outside of removal proceedings.

The Supreme Court decision in *Patel v. Garland* is an obstacle to district court review of USCIS denials of applications to adjust status to lawful permanent resident. 596 U.S. 328 (2022). The INA bars judicial review of “any judgment regarding the granting of relief” under § 245 (8 U.S.C. § 1255), except for federal appellate review of constitutional claims or questions of law presented in a petition for review. *See* 8 U.S.C. § 1252(a)(2)(B)(i), (a)(2)(D). Prior to *Patel*, several circuits concluded that 8 U.S.C. § 1252(a)(2)(B)(i) did not bar district court review if the question presented was non-discretionary, such as a question of law. *See, e.g., Sepulveda v. Gonzales*, 407 F.3d 59, 62-64 (2d Cir. 2005) (and cases cited therein).

The question before the Supreme Court in *Patel* was whether a federal appellate court lacked jurisdiction to review factual findings underlying the denial of an adjustment of status application in removal proceedings. 596 U.S. at 334-36. The Court concluded that 8 U.S.C. § 1252(a)(2)(B)(i) barred review of the factual findings because the phrase “any judgment regarding the granting of relief” applied to any decision related to the adjustment of status application. *Id.* at 338-40. The Court acknowledged the possibility that its ruling “will have the unintended consequence of precluding all review of USCIS denials of discretionary relief.” *Id.* at 345. While confirming that it was not deciding this question, the Court added: “But it is possible that Congress did, in fact, intend to close that door.” *Id.*

§ 245.1(g); 22 C.F.R. § 2.32(a)-(c); USCIS, *Form I-140 Instructions*, 10 (May 31, 2022), <https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/forms/i-140instr.pdf>.

²³ *See Mantena v. Johnson*, 809 F.3d 721, 728 (2d Cir. 2015) (bar against review of discretionary decisions does not apply to “the *procedure* surrounding the substantive decision”) (emphasis in original); *Abdelwahab*, 578 F.3d at 821 (no bar to reviewing “predicate legal question,” but deciding the I-140 beneficiary had not raised such a question).

The government now relies on *dicta* in *Patel* to argue that 8 U.S.C. § 1252(a)(2)(B)(i) forecloses any possibility of district court review of adjustment of status application denials. Three federal courts of appeal have extended *Patel* to bar district court review of USCIS denials of adjustment of status.²⁴ In *Abuzeid v. Mayorkas*, an employment-based adjustment of status denial presented a purely legal issue: whether USCIS incorrectly interpreted language in the foreign residency statute applicable to some J-1 exchange visitors. 62 F.4th 578, 582 (D.C. Cir. 2023). The court found no jurisdiction to review that issue, acknowledging its interpretation of 8 U.S.C.

§ 1252(a)(2)(B)(i) “leaves no path for judicial review of denials of adjustment of status by USCIS,” based on the “plain meaning of the statute” and *Patel*. *Id.* at 585. *Accord Doe v. Sec’y, U.S. Dep’t of Homeland Sec.*, No. 22-11818, 2023 WL 2564856, at *2 (11th Cir. Mar. 20, 2023) (per curiam) (“plain text” of 8 U.S.C. § 1252(a)(2)(B)(i) bars jurisdiction to review USCIS denial of adjustment of status pursuant to 8 U.S.C. § 1255(m), for people in U visa status who meet the statutory requirements); *Britkovvy v. Mayorkas*, 60 F.4th 1024, 1028-29 (7th Cir. 2023) (*Patel* supports conclusion that “plain language” of INA 8 U.S.C. § 1252(a)(2)(B)(i) bars review of USCIS’ denial of a family-based adjustment of status application).

In *Ved v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, the agency unsuccessfully asked the court to extend *Patel* to preclude review of an I-140 revocation. No. 3:22-cv-88-SLG, 2023 WL 2372360, at *3-4 (D. Alaska Mar. 6, 2023). If USCIS had succeeded, this tactic would have provided another basis for overturning the Ninth Circuit precedent that revocations are reviewable if the issue were to reach the appellate court *en banc*. See *ANA Int’l*, 393 F.3d at 893-94. The district court pointed out that *Patel* did not address 8 U.S.C. § 1252(a)(2)(B)(ii), and more specifically “how courts should determine if a decision is adequately discretionary under clause (ii).” *Ved*, 2023 WL 2372360, at *4. *Patel* did not raise either the Ninth Circuit’s interpretation of clause (ii) or its holding as to revocation reviewability. *Id.*²⁵

3. The mandamus statute is another source of federal court jurisdiction while the declaratory judgment statute is not.

In some cases, the mandamus statute, 28 U.S.C. § 1361, which gives a federal court authority to compel a federal agency or officer to perform a nondiscretionary duty owed to the plaintiff, provides an alternative basis for jurisdiction. See *Sawan v. Chertoff*, 589 F. Supp. 2d 817, 822 (S.D. Tex. 2008); *Kim v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, 551 F. Supp. 2d 1258, 1261-62 (D. Colo. 2008); *Dong v. Chertoff*, 513 F. Supp. 2d 1158, 1161 (N.D. Cal. 2007).²⁶

²⁴ In *Elldakli*, the Fifth Circuit held that USCIS adjustment of status decisions outside of the removal context were not final agency action. 64 F.4th at 669-71. As the Fifth Circuit considers the APA finality requirement to be jurisdictional, the Fifth Circuit affirmed the district court’s dismissal for lack of subject matter jurisdiction, independent of 8 U.S.C. § 1252(a)(2)(B)(i). *Id.* See *supra* § IV.B & n.10.

²⁵ Proceeding to the merits, the court concluded that USCIS did not have “good and sufficient cause” for revocation. *Id.* at *9.

²⁶ Some courts have found that the requirements for a mandamus action are not met because the APA provides an alternative form of relief. See *M.J.L. v. McAleenan*, 420 F. Supp. 3d 588, 598 (W.D. Tex. 2019), *magistrate’s rep. adopted*, No. 1:19-CV-477-LY, 2020 WL 10056215

In contrast, the Declaratory Judgment Act, 28 U.S.C. § 2201, is a procedural statute that does not confer jurisdiction. *Skelly Oil Co. v. Phillips Petroleum Co.*, 339 U.S. 667, 671-72 (1950); *see also Fleet Bank, Nat'l Ass'n v. Burke*, 160 F.3d 883, 886 (2d Cir. 1998); *Missouri ex rel. Mo. Highway and Transp. Comm'n v. Cuffley*, 112 F.3d 1332, 1334 (8th Cir. 1997). As such, the Declaratory Judgment Act provides for relief rather than for jurisdiction. The jurisdictional basis for a claim under the Declaratory Judgment Act, as under the APA, is 28 U.S.C. § 1331.

B. Venue: Where to File

APA and mandamus actions arising from employment-based immigration petitions (or applications) must be filed in federal district court. Whether a case is filed in the correct district court depends upon venue—the location over which the court has jurisdiction. Venue for challenging federal agency action is based on 28 U.S.C. § 1391(e), which provides that a suit against the federal government or a federal official acting in his or her official capacity can be brought in any judicial district where (1) a defendant resides, (2) a substantial part of the events or omissions giving rise to the claim occurred, or (3) the plaintiff resides if no real property is involved in the action. For a business that is legally able to file suit in its own name, the residence would be its principal place of business. 28 U.S.C. § 1391(c). *See Blacher v. Ridge*, 436 F. Supp. 2d 602, 608 (S.D.N.Y. 2006).

Even when venue is proper, a court may grant a motion to transfer “[f]or the convenience of parties and witnesses, in the interest of justice” to any jurisdiction where the suit “might have been brought or . . . to which all parties have consented.” 28 U.S.C. § 1404(a).²⁷ In the past, Washington, D.C. generally was an acceptable venue because the USCIS Director and Service Center Operations were located in D.C. More recently, the government has been successful with motions to transfer venue in lawsuits challenging employment-based petition denials from D.C. Some cases were transferred to the jurisdiction in which the plaintiff resided, while others were transferred to the jurisdiction in which the Service Center Director was located.²⁸

Additionally, the government lost a motion to transfer to D.C. a lawsuit by a California-based regional center challenging the denial of an immigrant investor (EB-5) petition. *Behring Reg'l*

(W.D. Tex. Jan. 24, 2020) (mandamus claim dismissed where APA provides a remedy to challenge delay in adjudicating U visa applications). For more information about agency delay actions, see the NILA and Council Practice Advisory, [Mandamus and APA Delay Cases: Avoiding Dismissal and Proving the Case](#) (Feb. 19, 2021) and the Council Practice Advisory, [Agency Delay Litigation: Opposing a Motion to Dismiss](#) (Oct. 4, 2019).

²⁷ *See Piper Aircraft Co. v. Reyno*, 454 U.S. 235, 253 (1981) (“Congress enacted § 1404(a) to permit change of venue between federal courts.”). The court first must determine that the lawsuit could have been filed in the alternative jurisdiction and, if so, then weighs private- and public-interest factors to decide if transfer is warranted. *See Aishat v. U.S. Dep’t of Homeland Sec.*, 288 F. Supp. 3d 261, 268 (D.D.C. 2018).

²⁸ *Pengbo Li v. Miller*, Civ. No. 20-1122 (EGS), 2021 WL 1124541, at *3, 5 (D.D.C. Mar. 24, 2021) (I-140 petition denial; transferred to D. Neb. where defendant Service Center

Ctr., LLC v. Wolf, No. 20-cv-09263-JSC, 2021 WL 1164839, at *3-4 (N.D. Cal. Mar. 26, 2021). The court rejected the government’s arguments that transfer was warranted because “a substantial part of the events” occurred in D.C., where the adjudicating office and headquarters were located, which was “where policies related to the EB-5 program and all other immigration issues are developed.” *Id.* at *4. The court noted that if policy formulation governed, “nearly all APA actions” should be decided in D.C., but that is not the rule. *Id.*²⁹

Other decisions indicated that a lawsuit challenging policies could weigh in favor of D.C. venue but granted motions to transfer from D.C. because plaintiffs’ claims were based on specific petition denials rather than policies. *See, e.g., Pengbo Li*, 2021 WL 1124541, at *4; *EfficientIP*, 2020 WL 6683068, at *3. However, with the transfer of some, and eventually all of USCIS headquarters offices from D.C. to Camp Springs, Maryland, venue in D.C. for lawsuits challenging employment-based petition denials likely will be limited to when the plaintiff resides there. *See Laurel v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, No. 21-cv-552-RMM, 2022 WL 971236, at *3 (D.D.C. Mar. 21, 2022) (H-1B petition denial; rejecting plaintiff’s choice of D.C., noting headquarters transfer and even if some officials were in D.C., their “mere involvement” is not determinative; transferred to E.D.N.Y. where plaintiff resides).³⁰

C. Causes of Action

The APA is the most common statutory basis for challenging the denial of an employment-based petition. *See, e.g., Shalom Pentecostal Church v. Acting Sec’y U.S. Dep’t of Homeland Sec.*,

director’s decisions underlying the claims were made); *Ike v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, No. 20-cv-1744 (CRC), 2020 WL 7360214, at *1-2 (D.D.C. Dec. 15, 2020) (I-140 petition denial; transferred to N.D. Tex. where defendant Service Center director resides and a “substantial part” of the events occurred); *EfficientIP, Inc. v. Cuccinelli*, No. 1:20-cv-01455 (TNM), 2020 WL 6683068, at *2 (D.D.C. Nov. 12, 2020) (unspecified nonimmigrant visa petition denial; transferred to N.D. Tex., where “alleged errors” by Service Center director occurred); *Onaghise v. U.S. Dep’t of Homeland Sec.*, No. 1:20-cv-01048 (TNM), 2020 WL 5642280, at *1-2 (D.D.C. Sept. 22, 2020) (I-140 petition denial; transferred to N.D. Tex. where Service Center director resided and petition adjudicated); *Wolfram Alpha LLC v. Cuccinelli*, 490 F. Supp. 3d 324, 339 (D.D.C. 2020) (H-1B petition denial; transferred to N.D. Ill. where plaintiff resides); *McAfee, LLC v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, No. 19-cv-2981 (DLF), 2019 WL 6051559, at *2 (D.D.C. Nov. 15, 2019) (H-1B petition denial; transferred to C.D. Cal. where defendant Service Center Director resides and claim arose); *see also Nelson v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, No. 20-1934 (CKK), 2021 WL 765660, at *1-2 (D.D.C. Feb. 25, 2021) (I-140 petition denial; government moved, and plaintiff consented, to transfer to D. Mass. where plaintiff resided).

²⁹ *Accord Gutta v. Renaud*, No. 20-cv-06579-DMR, 2021 WL 533757, at *8 (N.D. Cal. Feb. 12, 2021) (motion to transfer venue to D.D.C. denied when one of the multiple plaintiffs in a lawsuit challenging denials of immigrant investor petitions resided in the jurisdiction where the lawsuit was filed).

³⁰ The government sometimes moves to dismiss on the ground that venue is improper, pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1406(a). In *Kantharia v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, the court

783 F.3d 156 (3d Cir. 2015) (APA challenge to denial of special immigrant religious worker (EB-4) visa classification); *Fogo de Chao (Holdings) Inc. v. U.S. Dep't of Homeland Sec.*, 769 F.3d 1127, 1135 (D.C. Cir. 2014) (APA challenge to denial of specialized knowledge intracompany transferee (L-1B) visa classification); *Spencer Enters., Inc. v. United States*, 345 F.3d 683 (9th Cir. 2003) (APA challenge to denial of immigrant investor (EB-5) visa classification)³¹; *Chung Song Ja Corp. v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, 96 F. Supp. 3d 1191 (W.D. Wash. 2015) (APA challenge to denial of specialty occupation (H-1B) visa classification). The APA creates a “cause of action” because it provides a basis to sue a federal agency where Congress has not provided a basis elsewhere in the law. *See Bennett v. Spear*, 520 U.S. 154, 175 (1997).

Specifically, the APA provides:

A person suffering legal wrong because of agency action, or adversely affected or aggrieved by agency action within the meaning of a relevant statute, is entitled to judicial review thereof.

5 U.S.C. § 702. The APA defines “agency action” to include “the whole or a part of an agency rule, order, license, sanction, relief, or the equivalent or denial thereof, or failure to act.” 5 U.S.C. § 551(13).

Although the APA does not explicitly provide for a private right of action, it “permits the court to provide redress for a particular kind of ‘claim.’” *Trudeau v. Fed. Trade Comm’n*, 456 F.3d 178, 188 n.15 (D.C. Cir. 2006). Accordingly, the Supreme Court has repeatedly held that a separate indication of Congressional intent of the right to sue is not necessary. *Japan Whaling Ass’n v. Am. Cetacean Soc’y*, 478 U.S. 221, 230 n.4 (1986); *see also Chrysler Corp. v. Brown*, 441 U.S. 281, 317 (1979) (finding that a private right of action is not necessary because review is available under the APA).

The Mandamus and Venue Act of 1962, 28 U.S.C. § 1361, may provide an additional cause of action. Congress has given federal district courts the authority to compel a federal officer or employee, including those who work for federal agencies, to carry out a non-discretionary duty clearly owed to the plaintiff, who has no other adequate remedy. *See Am. Hosp. Ass’n v. Burwell*, 812 F.3d 183, 189 (D.C. Cir. 2016). Since mandamus only applies to actions that *must* be performed and do not require the exercise of discretion, courts often describe the duty as

rejected plaintiffs’ argument that the location of their investments established venue for their lawsuit challenging the denial of immigrant investor petitions. No. 23-cv-1120-MCS-KK, 2023 WL 3444070, at *2-3 (C.D. Cal. May 12, 2023). The court concluded that investment location alone, without “significant adjudicative action,” did not satisfy the venue provision of 28 U.S.C. § 1391(e)(1)(B), where a substantial part of the events or omissions giving rise to the claim occurred. *Id.* at *3. While 28 U.S.C. § 1406(a) provides for transfer, instead of dismissal, in “the interest of justice,” the court dismissed because it was “unclear” from the parties’ briefs whether venue would be proper in D.C. or Maryland. *Id.*

³¹ *See supra* n.16.

“ministerial.” *Johnson v. Reilly*, 349 F.3d 1149, 1154 (9th Cir. 2003) (internal citation omitted).³²

D. Parties

1. Plaintiffs

In all federal court litigation, Article III of the Constitution requires that a plaintiff have standing, or legal capacity, to sue. To this end, a plaintiff must have suffered 1) an “injury in fact,” *i.e.*, harm to a legally protected interest that is “concrete and particularized” and “actual or imminent”; 2) that is “fairly traceable to” the challenged conduct; and 3) is “likely to be redressed” by a favorable decision. *See Lujan v. Defs. of Wildlife*, 504 U.S. 555, 560-61 (1992) (internal citations omitted). Several courts have held that beneficiaries of employment-based visa petitions satisfy this test. *See, e.g., Shalom Pentecostal Church v. Acting Sec’y U.S. Dep’t of Homeland Sec.*, 783 F.3d 156, 162-63 (3d Cir. 2015); *Patel v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, 732 F.3d 633, 637-38 (6th Cir. 2013); *but see Patel*, 732 F.3d at 642 (Daughtrey, Cir. J., dissenting) (arguing that beneficiary failed to show necessary redressability because he could not get an approved I-140 unless the employer first obtained a labor certification from DOL, neither of which were parties).

For APA claims, a plaintiff also must establish that their claim falls within the relevant “zone of interests.” As discussed above, the APA provides that a person who has suffered a “legal wrong” or been “adversely affected or aggrieved by agency action within the meaning of a relevant statute, is entitled to judicial review.” 5 U.S.C. § 702. The Supreme Court has interpreted this language to require a showing that the plaintiff’s claim falls within the “zone of interests” that the statute was intended to protect and has suffered injuries “proximately caused” by the alleged statutory violation. *See Lexmark Int’l, Inc. v. Static Control Components, Inc.*, 572 U.S. 118, 129-30, 132-33 (2014) (internal citations omitted).³³

³² Even when an agency is not subject by law or regulation to a specific deadline, the reasonableness requirement of the APA, 5 U.S.C. § 706(1), can be asserted. *See Forest Guardians v. Babbitt*, 174 F.3d 1178, 1189-90 (10th Cir. 1999); *Kim v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, 551 F. Supp. 2d 1258, 1263-65 (D. Colo. 2008). *See supra* n.26 for more information about mandamus and APA delay lawsuits.

³³ Previously, the “zone of interests” also was considered to be jurisdictional and often was characterized as “prudential standing.” *See Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomi Indians v. Patchak*, 567 U.S. 209, 224-26 (2012). While explicitly citing to *Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band* for the application of the zone-of-interests test in the APA context, the Supreme Court in *Lexmark* rejected the “prudential standing” label. *See Lexmark*, 572 U.S. at 125, 127, 130. The Court further indicated that the zone-of-interests test is not jurisdictional since whether a party has a valid cause of action is a question of the court’s “statutory or constitutional *power* to adjudicate the case” and not of subject matter jurisdiction. *Id.* at 128 n.4 (emphasis in original, internal citations omitted). Whether analyzed as a jurisdictional or a substantive issue, the test is applied as described above.

To fall within the “zone of interests,” the plaintiff’s claims must be among those the statute “arguably” was intended to protect or regulate—a broader category than those Congress specifically intended to protect. *Lexmark*, 572 U.S. at 129-30 (internal citations omitted); *Ass’n of Data Processing Serv. Orgs., Inc. v. Camp*, 397 U.S. 150, 153 (1970); see *Clarke v. Secs. Indus. Ass’n*, 479 U.S. 388, 399-400 (1987) (“[T]here need be no indication of congressional purpose to benefit the would-be plaintiff.” (internal citation omitted)). In the APA context, the test is not “especially demanding,” since the “benefit of any doubt goes to the plaintiff” and the APA has “generous review provisions.” *Lexmark*, 572 U.S. at 130 (internal citations omitted). The zone-of-interests test would preclude an APA claim “only when a plaintiff’s interests are so marginally related to or inconsistent with the purposes implicit in the statute that it cannot reasonably be assumed that Congress authorized that plaintiff to sue.” *Id.* (quoting *Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band*, 567 U.S. at 225)).

Normally, the plaintiff in a suit challenging the denial of an employment-based visa petition in federal court is the petitioning employer. At the administrative level, a regulation bars an appeal by a beneficiary for purported lack of standing. See 8 C.F.R. § 103.3(a)(1)(iii)(B).³⁴ However, this regulation does not apply to the standing analysis in a federal court case and some noncitizen beneficiaries have brought successful challenges to denials of employment-based visa petitions.

Courts that have ruled favorably have held that a beneficiary of an employment-based immigrant visa petition (Form I-140) is within the zone of interests of the applicable sections of the INA and thus has standing to sue to challenge the petition denial. See *Patel*, 732 F.3d at 637 (beneficiary has standing to challenge I-140 denial because his interest in receiving visa places him within the zone of interests); *Taneja v. Smith*, 795 F.2d 355, 358 n.7 (4th Cir. 1986) (holding that where DOL has certified that the employment of the foreign worker would have no adverse impact on U.S. workers, the prospective employer has filed the I-140, and the beneficiary is in the country, then the beneficiary has an interest in the visa classification);³⁵ see also *Shalom Pentecostal Church*, 783 F.3d at 164 (noting that for various reasons special immigrant religious workers have an even greater interest in the petition than foreign nationals in some of the other

³⁴ In November 2017, USCIS created a limited exception to its regulatory prohibition against the participation of beneficiaries in administrative proceedings involving petitions filed by employers. See *Matter of V-S-G, Inc.*, Adopted Decision 2017-06 (AAO Nov. 11, 2017), available at <https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/USCIS/Laws/Memoranda/2017/2017-11-11-PM-602-0149-Matter-of-V-S-G-Inc.-Adopted-Decision.pdf>. USCIS now will give notice of its intent to revoke or notice of revocation of an I-140, if a beneficiary previously submitted a porting request which USCIS “favorably reviewed.” See USCIS Policy Manual, vol. 6, pt. E, ch. 10 § C, available at <https://www.uscis.gov/policy-manual/volume-6-part-e-chapter-10> (Policy Manual last visited Jan. 4, 2024).

³⁵ For practitioners in a circuit where the issue of beneficiary standing has not been decided, it may be helpful to draw analogous arguments from cases where the courts have held that beneficiaries of family-based visa petitions are within the “zone of interests.” See, e.g., *Bangura v. Hansen*, 434 F.3d 487, 499-500 (6th Cir. 2006); *Abboud v. Immigr. & Naturalization Serv.*, 140 F.3d 843, 847 (9th Cir. 1998), superseded by statute on other grounds, Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-208, 110 Stat. 3009, as recognized in *Spencer Enters., Inc. v. United States*, 345 F.3d 683, 692 n.5 (9th Cir. 2003).

employment-based categories). *But see Vemuri v. Napolitano*, 845 F. Supp. 2d 125, 131 (D.D.C. 2012) (beneficiary not within the zone of interests because his interests were “inconsistent with” congressional intent in protecting U.S. workers with the labor certification requirement applicable to his employment-based visa category); *Pai v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, 810 F. Supp. 2d 102, 107, 111-12 (D.D.C. 2011) (beneficiary abroad lacked concrete injury because uncertain when/whether could enter the United States to work for the petitioner; not within the zone of interests because Congress intended that the labor certification requirements applicable to her employment-based visa category primarily protect “American labor” and protect employers’ right to hire foreign workers if no qualified/available U.S. workers).

With respect to the revocation of a previously approved employment-based immigrant visa petition (I-140), courts have held that the beneficiary falls within the zone of interests and thus has standing to sue over USCIS’ failure to comply with procedural prerequisites for revocation. *See, e.g., Mantena v. Johnson*, 809 F.3d 721, 731-32 (2d Cir. 2015) (I-140 beneficiary who “ported” to new employer has a statutory interest in receiving notice—either to her or her new employer—of USCIS’ intent to revoke the petition); *Kurapati v. U.S. Bureau of Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, 775 F.3d 1255, 1261 (11th Cir. 2014) (per curiam) (beneficiaries of an approved I-140—not limited to only workers who “port”—have standing because of their statutory interest in receiving an immigrant visa) (citing *Patel*, 732 F.3d at 636-38); *see also Musunuru v. Lynch*, 831 F.3d 880, 888, 890-91 (7th Cir. 2016) (beneficiary had standing to raise pre-revocation procedural claims, but only his current employer was entitled to notice).

In *Khedkar v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, a beneficiary who notified USCIS that he had “ported” to new employers while the immigrant petition filed by the initial employer remained pending challenged the agency’s denial of the petition. 552 F. Supp. 3d 1, 6-7 (D.D.C. 2021). The initial employer did not respond to USCIS’ request for evidence and the agency rejected the beneficiary’s attempts to participate administratively. *Id.* at 6. The court concluded that the beneficiary had Article III standing because his “lost opportunity” to become a lawful permanent resident was a concrete injury the court could redress. *Id.* at 9. The court also concluded that the beneficiary was within the “zone of interests” because Congress provided for visa issuance (in the multinational manager category) to the beneficiary rather than the employer and because Congress had enacted the portability statute to give beneficiaries flexibility in their employment “without risking their shot at permanent residency.” *Id.* at 10-11. The court expressly disagreed with the *Vemuri* and *Pai* decisions, describing them as “older” and lacking the *Lexmark* clarification that the “zone of interests” is “better understood as defining the scope of a statutory provision’s cause of action,” with the APA setting a “low bar.” *Id.* at 9-10.

Reported cases addressing whether beneficiaries of employment-based nonimmigrant petitions have standing are scarce. At least one court found that beneficiaries of H-1B visa petitions have constitutional standing and are within the H-1B provisions of the INA’s zone of interests. *Tenrec, Inc. v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, No. 3:16-cv-995-SI, 2016 WL 5346095, at *8-9 (D. Or. Sept. 22, 2016) (H-1B petition approval gives beneficiaries “the right to live and work in the United States” and imposes obligations such as complying with “extensive regulations” on

their conduct; they also have the potential for future employment with a new petitioner).³⁶ Still another court found that an L-1A petition beneficiary had standing because of the harm he would suffer from a denial of the petition. *Ore v. Clinton*, 675 F. Supp. 2d 217, 223 (D. Mass. 2009) (L-1A petition beneficiary had constitutional standing because he would benefit from being able to enter the United States to work, which the petition denial harmed, and the court could redress).

However, other courts have found that beneficiaries of nonimmigrant visa petitions do not have standing. *See, e.g., Commonwealth Utils. Corp. v. Johnson*, 245 F. Supp. 3d 1239, 1255-58 (D. N. Mar. I. 2017) (CW-1 petition beneficiaries are not within the zone of interests because nothing in the law indicates congressional intent authorizing them to challenge the agency's petition selection process; they have no right to be admitted to U.S. territory to work temporarily); *Hisp. Affairs Project v. Perez*, 206 F. Supp. 3d 348, 368-69 (D.D.C. 2016) (H-2A shepherders not within the zone of interests because congressional intent was to protect U.S. workers), *modified*, 319 F.R.D. 3 (D.D.C. 2016), *aff'd in part and rev'd in part on other grounds*, *Hisp. Affairs Project v. Acosta*, 901 F.3d 378 (D.C. Cir. 2018);³⁷ *Cost Saver Mgmt., LLC v. Napolitano*, No. CV 10-2105-JST, 2011 WL 13119439, at *3-4 (C.D. Cal. June 7, 2011) (L-1A petition denial did not injure beneficiary outside the United States because only the prospective employer had a legally protected interest in the petition).

A few courts have held that the beneficiary of a labor certification application has standing. *See De Jesus Ramirez v. Reich*, 156 F.3d 1273, 1276, 1278 (D.C. Cir. 1998) (finding standing where there was no statutory indication that Congress intended to preclude beneficiaries from suing; but affirming petition denials because employers did not comply with DOL review requirements); *Stenographic Machines, Inc. v. Reg'l Adm'r for Emp. & Training*, 577 F.2d 521, 528 (7th Cir. 1978) (emphasizing that the test could be met by showing that the plaintiff is within the zone of interests to be protected *or* regulated by the statute, and finding that beneficiary satisfied both) (emphasis added) (citing *Ass'n of Data Processing Serv. Orgs.*, 397 U.S. at 153);³⁸ *see also*

³⁶ Another court found that a beneficiary had constitutional standing because he suffered a “concrete, particularized economic harm” from USCIS’ revocation of his first H-1B employer’s petition and the agency’s delay in adjudicating an H-1B petition filed by another employer. *Parcha v. Cuccinelli*, No. 4:20-CV-015-SDJ, 2020 WL 607103, at *3 (E.D. Tex. Feb. 7, 2020). Noting that the zone-of-interests test was not jurisdictional, the court opted not to decide the question and proceeded to deny the beneficiary’s preliminary injunction motion. *Id.* at *7 n.5.

³⁷ The district court concluded it was bound by *Mendoza v. Perez*, 754 F.3d 1002 (D.C. Cir. 2014), which held that Congress clearly intended to protect U.S. workers from being adversely affected by the employment of H-2A workers. *Hisp. Affairs Project*, 206 F. Supp. 3d at 368. On reconsideration, the court decided that plaintiff Hispanic Affairs Project had standing to sue on behalf of members who were lawful permanent residents because they were within the zone of interests as U.S. workers. *See* 319 F.R.D. at 7-8. But there were no H-2A worker plaintiffs in *Mendoza*, and their interests are not mutually exclusive of U.S. workers’ interests. *See Tenrec*, 2016 WL 5346095, at *9 (“The D.C. Circuit did not, however, find that the INA’s H-2A provisions were *only* concerned with American workers.”) (emphasis in original).

³⁸ These two appellate decisions predate *Lexmark*, 572 U.S. at 129-30, so they discuss whether the beneficiaries had “prudential standing.” *See supra* n.33. They also predate the current system for permanent employment certification. *See* 20 C.F.R. Part 656. However, the

Hsaio v. Scalia, 821 F. App'x 680, 683 (9th Cir. 2020) (beneficiary had constitutional standing because she lost “a significant opportunity” to proceed with the permanent residency process when DOL denied the permanent employment certification application; she was within the “zone of interests” because “labor certification would provide [her] eligibility to work”).³⁹

Even though a beneficiary may be found to have standing to sue, the court may dismiss for failure to state a claim upon which relief may be granted if the visa category requires continued sponsorship and the employer (or prospective employer) is no longer committed to hiring the beneficiary. Since an I-140 beneficiary who has “ported” to new employment does not require the petitioning employer’s continued support, the beneficiary’s independent interest in the approved I-140 is easier to establish in these cases. In non-porting cases, if the petitioner remains willing to sponsor the beneficiary, practitioners should consider including factual allegations about the intent of the petitioner and the beneficiary to proceed with the employment if the beneficiary prevails.

2. Defendants

The APA specifies that an action seeking mandatory or injunctive relief “shall specify the Federal officer or officers (by name or by title), and their successors in office, personally responsible for compliance.” 5 U.S.C. § 702. Accordingly, an APA action would name as a defendant the specific individual or their title, within DHS who is authorized to carry out any injunction or other mandatory order of the court. In the case of visa petition denials, this individual usually is the Director of USCIS.⁴⁰ Similarly, a mandamus action could name the official with ultimate authority over the action that the suit seeks to compel (such as, for example, the Director of USCIS), as well as the director of the particular office responsible for taking the action. In both types of cases, the defendants are named in their official capacities.

VI. Relief

A. Non-Monetary Damages

A prevailing party in an APA or mandamus action does not receive money damages. The relief sought will depend upon the nature of the claim. If the USCIS denial was wrong as a matter of law, the court can vacate the denial and approve the petition. If the challenge is to USCIS’ findings of fact or application of the law to the facts, then the court can remand with specific

regulatory change in the certification process does not affect whether the beneficiary’s interest falls within the statute’s zone of interests.

³⁹ DOL’s certification would provide the beneficiary with work eligibility in the context of being a prerequisite to her ability to continue in the green card process. *Hsaio*, 821 F. App'x at 683. The court also cited the agency’s permanent employment certification application regulations, which recognize foreign nationals as beneficiaries, as support for finding this beneficiary to be within the zone of interests. *Id.*

⁴⁰ Some attorneys also name the Director of the Service Center who issued the denial. For more information on who should be named as defendants, see the Council, NILA and National Immigration Project of the National Lawyers Guild (NIP) Practice Advisory, [*Whom To Sue and Whom To Serve in Immigration-Related District Court Litigation*](#) (Sept. 14, 2022).

instructions as to how the agency must correct its errors. If mandamus is sought, the complaint should make clear the duty that the court should order USCIS to perform. If applicable, a complaint should include a request for reasonable attorney’s fees under the Equal Access to Justice Act⁴¹ and a “catch all” provision, asking the court to order any other relief that the court deems appropriate.

B. Standard of Review

The standard applied by the court can be critical in a case; among other things, it will determine the level of deference that the court gives to the agency’s interpretation of applicable statutes or regulations. While the relevant standard of review can be specified in a complaint, parties most often urge the court to apply a particular standard in their briefs filed in support of summary judgment.

The applicable standard of review under the APA in a case where USCIS has denied an employment-based petition is whether the agency’s decision was “arbitrary, capricious, an abuse of discretion, or otherwise not in accordance with law.” 5 U.S.C. § 706(2)(A). Under the “arbitrary and capricious” standard, the court reviews whether an agency “articulate[d] a satisfactory explanation for its action including a rational connection between the facts found and the choice made.” *Motor Vehicle Mfrs. Ass’n v. State Farm Mut. Auto Ins. Co.*, 463 U.S. 29, 43 (1983) (internal quotation omitted); *see also Residential Fin. Corp. v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, 839 F. Supp. 2d 985, 996-97 (S.D. Ohio 2012) (USCIS made “inexplicable errors” constituting a “litany of incompetence that presents fundamental misreading of the record...” and thus failed to articulate “an untainted, satisfactory explanation for the denial that rationally connected the facts to the decision”).

However, some courts describe the standard as whether an agency’s findings are supported by “substantial evidence”—which is the standard when the agency decision follows a formal hearing on the record. *See* 5 U.S.C. § 706(2)(E); *Family Inc. v. U.S. Citizenship & Immigr. Servs.*, 469 F.3d 1313, 1315-16 (9th Cir. 2006) (USCIS’ finding that the beneficiary was not engaged in primarily managerial duties, and thus not eligible for a multinational manager classification, “is supported by substantial evidence.”).

Some federal circuit courts have held that there is not much difference between these two standards. *See, e.g., ASSE Int’l, Inc. v. Kerry*, 803 F.3d 1059, 1071 (9th Cir. 2015) (defining and comparing the two standards); *Ass’n of Data Processing Serv. Orgs. v. Bd. of Governors of Fed. Reserve Sys.*, 745 F.2d 677, 684 (D.C. Cir. 1984) (“[T]he distinction between the substantial evidence test and the arbitrary or capricious test is ‘largely semantic.’”) (citations omitted). Under the “substantial evidence” standard, the court is reviewing whether, based on the record before the agency, a reasonable fact finder would be compelled to reach a different result. *See Ursack, Inc. v. Sierra Interagency Black Bear Group*, 639 F.3d 949, 958 & n.4 (9th Cir. 2011) (arbitrary and capricious standard “incorporates” substantial evidence standard, so use substantial evidence standard to review informal agency proceedings); *Family Inc.*, 469 F.3d at 1315; *see also Fogo de Chao (Holdings)*, 769 F.3d at 1147 (substantial evidence standard “not

⁴¹ *See infra* § VI.C.

boundless,” but agency not allowed to “close its eyes to on-point and uncontradicted record evidence” without explanation).

When reviewing the agency’s factual findings, a federal court is not acting as a fact finder itself. “[W]hen a party seeks review of agency action under the APA, the district judge sits as an appellate tribunal. The ‘entire case’ on review is a question of law.” *Am. Bioscience, Inc. v. Thompson*, 269 F.3d 1077, 1083 (D.C. Cir. 2001) (footnote and citation omitted).

In contrast, a federal court exercises de novo review under the APA over purely legal issues. *Aleutian Cap. Partners, LLC v. Scalia*, 975 F.3d 220, 229 (2d Cir. 2020); *Wagner v. Nat’l Transp. Safety Bd.*, 86 F.3d 928, 930 (9th Cir. 1996). One example of an error of law would be USCIS’s application of an incorrect standard of proof. USCIS is supposed to apply the “preponderance of the evidence” standard of proof in deciding whether a party has submitted sufficient proof of eligibility for the visa classification. *See Matter of Chawathe*, 25 I&N Dec. 369, 375 (AAO 2010) (noting that preponderance of the evidence is the standard of proof in administrative immigration proceedings unless a different standard is specified by law); *see also* USCIS Policy Manual, vol. 1, pt. E, ch. 4 § B, available at <https://www.uscis.gov/policy-manual/volume-1-part-e-chapter-4>. To satisfy the “preponderance” standard, a petitioner or applicant must show that it is “more likely than not” a claim is true based on “relevant, probative and credible evidence.” *Matter of Chawathe*, 25 I&N Dec. at 376; *see also* USCIS Policy Manual vol.1, pt. E, ch. 4 § B. If USCIS erroneously held a petitioner or applicant to a higher standard, he or she may have a strong basis for arguing that the agency erred as a matter of law and the court would review this issue de novo.

C. Attorneys’ Fees under the Equal Access to Justice Act

While a request for attorneys’ fees and costs under the Equal Access to Justice Act (EAJA), 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d) and 5 U.S.C. § 504 *et seq.*, should be listed in the complaint as part of the relief sought, practitioners must file a separate motion for fees and costs with the court within the statutory deadline (unless the parties settle the fee issue). The following are the general requirements for recovering fees and must be included in the motion:

- A showing that the client is the prevailing party, *i.e.*, that the party was awarded “some relief by the court.” *Buckhannon Board of Care & Home Inc. v. West Virginia Dep’t of Health & Human Res.*, 532 U.S. 598, 603 (2001); *see* 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d)(1)(A).⁴² Some examples are:
 - Enforceable judgment on the merits.
 - Consent decree enforceable by the court in which the government agrees to stop the alleged illegal activity, even without an admission of guilt or wrongdoing.

⁴² While the fees requested in *Buckhannon* arose under a different statute, the Supreme Court addressed fee-shifting statutes, which includes the EAJA. *Id.* at 602-03; *see also Aronov v. Napolitano*, 562 F.3d 84, 89 (1st Cir. 2009) (en banc) (“*Buckhannon* sets the minimum standards for prevailing party status under the EAJA.”).

- Order granting mandamus, and remanding to the agency, to adjudicate an application for an immigration benefit.
- A showing that the client meets the “net worth” requirements. 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d)(2)(B).
 - For an individual, net worth cannot exceed \$2 million when suit filed.
 - For an owner of an unincorporated business, a partnership or a corporation, net worth cannot exceed \$7 million and cannot have more than 500 employees when suit filed.
 - For a nonprofit that qualifies for tax-exempt status under § 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, net worth is not an issue, but it cannot have more than 500 employees when suit filed.
- A showing that the government’s position, either pre-litigation or during litigation, was not substantially justified. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d)(1)(A), (d)(2)(D).
- A showing that there are no special circumstances to make an award unjust. 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d)(3). The burden of proof is on the government to establish the existence of special circumstances. *United States ex rel. Wall v. Circle C Constr., LLC*, 868 F.3d 466, 471 (6th Cir. 2017).
- A statement that includes the total amount of fees and costs requested, accompanied by an itemized account of the time spent and rates charged. Attorneys must take the time to prepare contemporaneous time records, which describe the work accomplished and the cost incurred. Attorneys also can submit time records for law clerks and paralegals.

Practitioners also need to have a written fee assignment agreement with the client and, if there are co-counsel, a separate agreement on how the fees will be allocated if awarded by the court or in a settlement agreement. The best practice would be to enter into these agreements at the same time the engagement letter is signed. Without a fee assignment agreement, EAJA fees will belong to the client. *See Astrue v. Ratliff*, 560 U.S. 586, 596-97 (2010). Finally, motions for fees and costs under EAJA must be filed within 30 days of the entry of final judgment. *See* 28 U.S.C. §§ 2412(d)(1)(B), (d)(2)(G).⁴³

VII. Conclusion

Federal court litigation is an important tool in reaching the goal of more consistent, less restrictive agency decisions. In particular, federal court litigation is an important way to check the agency’s misapplication of the law, which happens all too often in immigration cases. Any attorney who would like to discuss the viability of a federal court challenge in an employment-based immigration case may contact the American Immigration Council at clearinghouse@immcouncil.org.

⁴³ For more information on the EAJA requirements, see the Council, NILA, and NIP Practice Advisory, *Requesting Attorneys’ Fees Under the Equal Access to Justice Act* (Aug. 14, 2020).