

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

May 16, 2023

The Honorable Rita Bitter
Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs
Bureau of Consular Affairs
U.S Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Assistant Secretary Bitter,

Our constituents rely on the efficient and predictable provision of government services to make decisions and plan their lives. We know that the State Department can face unexpected challenges just like any large institution, but when those challenges persist, our constituents deserve explanations, communication, and recompense.

Last month, Secretary Antony Blinken testified before the House Appropriations Committee about the “dramatic” increase in passport requests, noting that the State Department is “*getting 500,000 applications a week for a passport. That's 30 to 40% above last year.*”[1] Congressional offices subsequently have been experiencing an influx of constituent requests for assistance on passports, now consisting of a disproportionate percentage of our Office’s constituent services caseload. Moreover, although the State Department issued roughly 22 million passport applications last fiscal year, it is clear that applications this year are on pace to exceed that number by 18%--suggesting that currently extended wait times could continue to increase.[2]

These processing delays and subsequent influx of requests to Congressional offices cause added stress for our constituents around long-planned travel and sometimes require them to pay additional money for expedited processing and/or overnight shipping fees they otherwise would not have pursued. Meanwhile, Congressional offices are having to dedicate additional time and resources that could be devoted to other constituent service demands.

We understand that passport processing challenges have coincided with the beta-test rollout of the Online Passport Renewal (OPR) system. We applaud the State Department’s efforts to streamline and improve response timing for our constituents seeking to renew their passports online, but questions remain regarding how the OPR system has been implemented, how this system was communicated to our constituents, and the level of oversight it has received from the State Department.

Finally, we ask that the State Department improve its internal communications among passport agencies, as well as external communications to Congressional offices, and most importantly, to our constituents, about efficiently navigating passport processing challenges. Moreover, our constituents deserve clearer communication about current estimated turnaround times, both at the application stage and while their application is in process, if their estimated receipt time changes. In addition, our Congressional offices and our constituents need to receive the same information

and guidance about what services are and are not available. Congressional offices are repeatedly experiencing instances where our constituents report that State's Passport Offices gave constituents expectations of our Congressional Offices' ability to assist them that conflicted with the guidance that State has provided to our Offices, such as the timelines we must follow in order to submit appointment requests.

To help Congress understand the current passport delays, please provide answers to the following questions:

1. How many new passport applications has the State Department received since January 1, 2023?
2. How many passport renewal applications has the State Department received since January 1, 2023?
3. How many new passport applications has the State Department processed since January 1, 2023?
4. How many passport renewals has the State Department processed since January 1, 2023?
5. How many new passport applications are currently in the State Department's queue to be processed?
6. How many passport renewal applications are currently in the State Department's queue to be processed?
7. How is passport application workload distributed/assigned to different passport offices around the country?
8. How does State address errors made in its passport processing? For instance, when application materials are lost, constituents receive the wrong passport, or there are delays or lack of clarity in notifying applicants of errors in their applications?
9. How does State address instances in which it is unable to meet its predicted timeline to applicants, which may necessitate them to pay additional overnight shipping charges?
 - a. Would State consider issuing refunds to applicants who paid for expedited shipping but did not receive their passport within the promised timeline?
10. Has State created a process for assisting applicants if it loses the applicant's identifying documentation (birth certificates, naturalization certificates etc)? If not, why?
11. How was the option to opt-in to OPR presented to applicants?
 - a. Was it made clear that the system was in Beta-testing?

- b. Were the potential risks of opting-in to OPR, such as longer processing times, errors, or lack of access to human assistance, made clear to applicants?
- 12. Our offices have heard reports of OPR-related delays dating back to November, 2022.
 - b. Does State have a procedure for manual human intervention in instances where errors with the automated OPR system resulted in longer processing times? If not, why?
 - c. Does State believe the OPR system would benefit from a manual intervention process in the case of persistent delays? If not, why? If so, has one been implemented? If not, why?
- 13. What are the metrics State is using to evaluate the performance of OPR? How is OPR performing on those metrics?
- 14. How does State currently view the future of OPR?
- 15. How has State decided what information to share with the general public about the passport delays?
- 16. Has State identified problems with how different Passport Offices share information about the status of an applicant's passport?
 - a. If so, what is State's plan to improve coordination between Offices?
- 17. How has State developed its messaging to the public about what Congressional Offices can provide to their constituents in terms of passport services?
- 18. How is State prioritizing the scheduling of limited counter appointments at passport agencies across the country, including for life-or-death emergencies and Congressional requests?
 - a. Do you have a plan to increase the number of available in-person appointments at Passport Offices in the future?
- 19: Please provide a timeline for the return of processing times to levels seen before the current spike in passport demand.
- 20: Please identify specific resources or support from Congress that will either alleviate the current backlog or prevent future backlogs.

We are grateful for your attention to these issues on behalf of our constituents.

Sincerely,