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State Department Passport Services: Background and Issues for Congress

Background

The U.S. Department of State (State Department, the Department) defines a passport as "an internationally recognized travel document that verifies the identity and nationality of the bearer." Congress has vested authority in the State Department to grant, issue, and verify U.S. passports. State Department data indicate that the number of passports it issues on an annual basis has increased substantially since the mid-1990s. The Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) issued over 5.5 million passports in FY1996, and this figure more than doubled by FY2006, reaching over 12 million. In FY2022, CA issued a record 21.9 million passports and expects to exceed this total in FY2023 (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1. U.S. Passports Issued, FY2019-FY2023

FY2019	20,690,491
FY2020	11,711,945
FY2021	15,496,590
FY2022	21,995,760
FY2023*	25,000,000
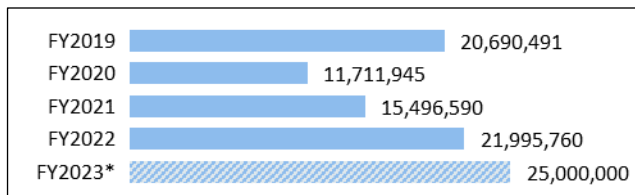
Source: State Department, Bureau of Consular Affairs, "Reports and Statistics," https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/about-us/reports-and-statistics.html.

Notes: The FY2023 figure is an estimate provided by Assistant Secretary of State Rena Bitter; U.S. Congress, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Examining the Fiscal Year 24 Bureau of Consular Affairs Budget*, hearing, 118th Cong. 1st sess., June 7, 2023.

Passport Application Adjudication and Processing Steps

Current State Department regulations require first-time applicants for a U.S. passport, along with most applicants under age 18, to submit their application in person at a passport acceptance facility. There are over 7,400 passport acceptance facilities across the United States. These sites include post offices, clerks of court, public libraries, and other local government offices. In many cases, those seeking to renew their passport are eligible to do so by mail.

Department of the Treasury-administered payment processing centers (often referred to as "lockbox facilities" or "lockboxes") are responsible for opening and sorting passport application packages, processing passport application fees, entering relevant application data into State Department servers, and transmitting application packages to passport agencies and centers for adjudication. CA currently administers 29 passport agencies and centers across the United States. In addition to adjudicating applications received from payment processing centers,

many passport agencies and centers offer in-person passport services by appointment to those with urgent international travel needs. Once a passport application is approved, information is electronically transmitted to a book print facility where the passport is printed. CA maintains two such facilities, located in Hot Springs, AR, and Tucson, AZ. After printing, the passport is mailed to the applicant.

While the aforementioned procedures generally apply to U.S. citizens in the United States, U.S. embassies and other overseas posts offer passport services to U.S. citizens abroad. Specific procedures vary by post. In most cases, U.S. citizens must apply for all passport services in person at the relevant embassy or consulate. Similar to passport agencies and centers in the United States, overseas posts offer appointments to U.S. citizens who require a passport for immediate international travel.

The 2023 Passport Surge

CA's published processing times for routine passport applications increased from 6-9 weeks in January 2023 to 10-13 weeks by March, and have not since decreased. Processing times for expedited passport applications also increased during this period, from 3-5 weeks to 7-9 weeks. In July 2023, the State Department said it was working to return processing times to pre-pandemic levels, which were (as of December 2019) 6-8 weeks for routine applications and 2-3 weeks for expedited applications, by the end of the calendar year. Several Members of Congress have raised concerns about longer processing times. In May 2023, approximately 200 Members transmitted a letter to Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs Rena Bitter stating that processing delays were affecting constituent travel plans and causing an influx of passport-related constituent inquiries to congressional offices that had grown to comprise a "disproportionate percentage" of constituent services caseloads. Additionally, the letter called on CA to improve its communications with congressional offices and constituents regarding passport processing challenges and accurate processing timelines.

In March 2023, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, while testifying before Congress, attributed increased processing times to "unprecedented demand," stating that the State Department was receiving 30%-40% more passport applications weekly than it did in 2022. When Congress convened hearings in June 2023 regarding the Department's consular services, Assistant Secretary Bitter noted several factors she attributed to longer processing times, including

- attrition within CA's passport adjudication workforce following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and continued in-person work requirements;

- pent-up demand for passports among the American public following the relaxing of COVID-19-related international travel restrictions;

- the fee-funded nature of CA's passport services, which prevented CA from bringing on additional passport adjudicative staff until application fee revenues began increasing as international travel restrictions receded;

- the lengthy process involved with hiring, vetting, and training new passport adjudicative staff; and

- growth in the percentage of American citizens who possess a passport—according to Assistant Secretary Bitter, 46% of U.S. citizens currently hold a U.S. passport, an increase from 30% in 2008 and 5% in 1990.

Assistant Secretary Bitter also noted several means CA was employing to adjudicate passports promptly in the immediate term, including authorizing between 30,000 and 40,000 overtime hours per month for staff, offering extended hours and weekend appointments at passport agencies and centers, and recruiting volunteers (including State Department retirees) and assigning Foreign Service officers to meet workload requirements. According to Assistant Secretary Bitter, these efforts enabled CA to issue 5.4% more passports in the first five months of FY2023 than it had over the same period in FY2022.

Assistant Secretary Bitter also indicated that the Department's efforts to meet higher passport demand over the medium and longer term (in other words, beyond the scope of the current surge) focused on two lines of effort: (1) modernizing consular systems and technology and (2) increasing staffing. She noted that CA intended to release an online passport renewal option before the end of 2023 that would initially enable 5 million Americans to renew their passports online. CA also increased its number of passport specialists from 1,197 in June 2022 to 1,316 in June 2023, and intends to bring on more personnel.

Issues for Congress

As Congress weighs possible means to enable CA to alleviate the current passport demand surge and improve passport processing, it may consider the following issues.

Fee Authorities. U.S. law has generally required CA to either remit many of the consular fees it collects to the Treasury or expend them only on specified consular functions. However, following the onset of COVID-19, in March 2020 Congress began providing CA new temporary authorities enabling it to expend these fees on consular services generally. Assistant Secretary Bitter noted that making these authorities permanent would enable CA to plan and advance its passport-related IT modernization and hiring efforts more effectively. While some Members of Congress have supported this proposal, others have expressed concern with Government Accountability Office (GAO) findings released in April 2022 indicating that CA had not comprehensively documented its analysis of potential impacts of its requested fee authority changes. Furthermore, CA has not concurred with a GAO

recommendation that it develop a plan to assess what fee authority changes were needed to cover consular costs, arguing that it has existing processes in place to track similar information. Should Congress wish to provide additional budgetary support for consular services without making flexible fee authorities permanent, it may consider authorizing CA to use funds appropriated for other diplomatic programs for consular services, or providing a direct appropriation to meet consular needs.

Online Passport Renewal. Assistant Secretary Bitter characterized CA's online passport renewal pilot program that concluded in March 2023 as a successful effort that would help inform the launch of a comprehensive online renewal option later in 2023. However, some Members of Congress expressed concern that technical difficulties during the pilot caused uncertainty among applicants and questioned State Department oversight of the program. As CA plans to offer a permanent online passport renewal option, Congress may consider what type of oversight to conduct of the preparation and what communication to require from CA to renewal applicants.

Passport Agency Nationwide Footprint. Some Members of Congress have advocated that CA increase the number of passport agencies nationwide, particularly in what they view as underserved areas in the western United States. For example, in April 2023 Utah's congressional delegation transmitted a letter to Secretary Blinken requesting that the State Department open a passport agency in Salt Lake City. The State Department has argued that opening such facilities does not constitute the most efficient means to improve passport services nationwide, maintaining that systems modernization (including online passport renewal) offers the best pathway toward preserving the affordability of passports and increasing the speed and convenience of passport services for the largest share of U.S. citizens. As Congress continues to engage with CA on the best options to improve consular services, it may consider whether or not to pass legislation requiring the establishment of additional passport agencies.

Consular Affairs Communication and Outreach. Given that the 10-13-week passport processing timeline is longer than that to which many U.S. citizens are accustomed, some Members of Congress have suggested that the State Department implement a public relations initiative to ensure greater public awareness of current wait times. Furthermore, some Members have noted that CA does not always provide clear, up-to-date information to constituents and congressional offices about efficiently navigating passport processing challenges. While CA has noted that it is prioritizing improvements in this area, Congress may consider strengthening oversight of CA's public engagement efforts, including through legislation requiring these efforts to meet certain standards or thresholds.

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