

LAUREN UNDERWOOD
14TH DISTRICT, ILLINOIS
underwood.house.gov

WASHINGTON OFFICE
1130 LONGWORTH HOB
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20515
(202) 225-2976

WEST CHICAGO OFFICE
490 E. ROOSEVELT ROAD, SUITE 202
WEST CHICAGO, IL 60185
(630) 549-2190



CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
RURAL DEVELOPMENT,
FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION, AND
RELATED AGENCIES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH

July 21, 2021

The Honorable Ian G. Brownlee
Acting Assistant Secretary
Bureau of Consular Affairs
U.S. Department of State
609 19th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20036

Dear Acting Assistant Secretary Brownlee,

I am writing to urge the Bureau of Consular Affairs to take further action to address the unacceptable processing delays for passport applications that my constituents are currently facing.

According to the U.S. Department of State website, passport processing times are significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels: routine service has an 18-week wait time and expedited service has a 12-week wait time.¹ With a backlog of up to two million applications, State Department officials have recently stated that it will “take time” for wait times to fall to pre-pandemic levels, further noting that “U.S. citizens who wish to travel overseas this summer and do not currently have a passport may need to make alternate travel plans.”²

These delays have been distressing and incredibly frustrating for members of my community: fully vaccinated families are cancelling long-awaited reunions with loved ones living abroad, business leaders are missing out on opportunities to build their global presence and strengthen our local economy, and people are missing out on weddings, milestone birthdays, and other ceremonies that are foundational to our lives together.

While some of the challenges facing your Bureau are understandable given the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the actions of the previous Administration, other failures – such as unclear communications with key stakeholders – demand immediate attention and improvement.

¹ U.S. Department of State – Bureau of Consular Affairs: *U.S. Passports Processing Times*. <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/passports/how-apply/processing-times.html>. Accessed July 17, 2021.

² U.S. Department of State – Office of the Spokesperson: *Briefing with Deputy Assistant Secretary for Passport Services Rachel Arndt, Bureau of Consular Affairs On the State Department's Passport Services*. <https://www.state.gov/briefing-with-deputy-assistant-secretary-for-passport-services-rachel-arndt-bureau-of-consular-affairs-on-the-state-departments-passport-services/>. Accessed July 17, 2021.

I have worked with my colleagues in Congress to ensure your Bureau has the necessary resources to respond to heightened demand for passport application services, including \$300 million for Consular and Border Security Programs in the *Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021*, which will support the resumption of normal consular operations, including passport processing.³ As a Member of the House Committee on Appropriations, I will continue to work to ensure that the Bureau has the funding that is needed for my constituents to have access to the timely services they need and deserve.

As the Bureau of Consular Affairs works to reduce the processing length from application to issuance for new passports and passport renewals, I respectfully request that the Bureau immediately take the following actions:

1. **Improve communications with constituents, Congressional offices, and other key stakeholders.** As you work to reduce the passport application backlog, it is imperative that the Bureau provides clear and timely communications about expected processing timelines, changes in procedures, and other important information. For example:
 - Ensure that constituents have the most up-to-date information on expected processing times for routine and expedited services.
 - Ensure that constituents who applied for expedited service but did not receive their passport within the expected processing time are aware that they may be eligible for a refund and understand the necessary steps to apply for a refund on the State Department website.
 - Communicate proactively with Congressional offices about any changes in passport application processes, contact information for the National Passport Information Center (NPIC), or other key information that our offices regularly share with constituents.
 - Provide clear guidance to the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and airlines about country-by-country enforcement of regulations related to the use of recently expired passports and passports that expire within six months of a traveler's scheduled return date.
 - Ensure Passport Acceptance Facilities have the most up-to-date estimates of passport processing timelines so that officials can provide accurate information to customers, and work with the United States Postal Service (USPS) to take all available actions to reduce the six-week mailing time for passports.⁴
 - Provide technical assistance to Citibank to address delays in payment processing and reduce application backlogs.

³ Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, H.R. 133, 116th Congress. (2020).

⁴ U.S. Department of State – Bureau of Consular Affairs: *U.S. Passports Processing Times*.
<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/passports/how-apply/processing-times.html>. Accessed July 17, 2021.

2. **Address the situations of constituents who applied for new passports or passport renewals prior to the June 15, 2021 announcement of longer processing times.** My office is working with constituents who submitted applications prior to the June 15 announcement and expected to receive their passports in time for planned trips. However, due to the delay, these constituents will no longer receive their passports in time. Some constituents have reported that after the June 15 announcement, they have attempted to upgrade their requests, including by providing their credit card information to pay for expedited processing. However, these constituents report that their payments are not being processed, their applications are not being expedited, and they are not receiving communication from the passport agency with reasoning for why their requests for expedited processing are not being completed.

To the extent practicable, passport agencies must process the expedited requests for which my constituents are paying. If there is a circumstance in which an expedited request cannot be completed, the passport agency must proactively communicate with the applicant.

3. **Improve procedures for constituents with emergency passport needs.** In instances in which constituents have been forced to travel internationally for emergency reasons, they have reported difficulties scheduling in-person appointments to get their passports until contacting my office. The Bureau must develop and publicize processes through which individuals can efficiently schedule in-person appointments for emergency passport needs without requiring the additional layer of Congressional intervention.
4. **Continue to expand staffing capacity to the greatest extent possible as public health guidance allows.** Prioritize efforts to return to full, in-person staffing levels at every passport agency to maximize the number of in-person appointments available to constituents and expand surge staffing capacity at call centers and other areas as needed.
5. **Protect constituents from passport scams.** Numerous Congressional offices have reported increasing numbers of scams and related efforts to sell in-person passport application appointments. The Bureau should take every possible step to warn constituents about passport scams and work in partnership with relevant agencies to address these attempts to take advantage of individuals and families.

My office has processed more than 120 constituent passport cases since May 1, 2021, with more cases coming in every week. On behalf of the community I represent, I urge you to take the immediate action that is required to ensure that my constituents can resume international travel as soon as possible. Thank you for your prompt attention to this critical issue.

Sincerely,

