



DEPARTMENT OF STATE
WRITTEN STATEMENT
OF
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ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE
BUREAU OF CONSULAR AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS AND THE FEDERAL
WORKFORCE

HEARING
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Chairman Sessions, Ranking Member Mfume, and other esteemed members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the work of the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs and to express my appreciation for the support we receive from Members of Congress and staff for our mission. Of all the State Department's bureaus, the Bureau of Consular Affairs has a unique nexus with our colleagues in the legislative branch. We are the State Department bureau responsible for providing public-facing and customer-centric services for the American people, and as such we consider your constituents to be our constituents.

The Bureau of Consular Affairs is a solely fee-funded bureau of the State Department, which comes with all the attendant challenges of operating a \$4 billion enterprise within a larger bureaucracy. To rise to that responsibility, we pursue continuous business improvement across our priority areas, five of which I will highlight below.

Priority: Safety and Security of U.S. Citizens Overseas

Our first priority has remained the same since the earliest days of our Republic: to protect the lives and serve the interests of U.S. citizens abroad, often in dynamic, dangerous situations. Most recently, our consular officers were present on the ground to assist U.S. citizens impacted by the violence in Sudan. Through this effort, and in close coordination with our allies and partners, we evacuated more than 2,000 U.S. citizens and their family members, along with U.S. lawful permanent residents, locally employed staff, and nationals from allied and partner countries. This was a complex and successful multinational effort under the most difficult circumstances, and a high-profile illustration of the lengths our consular officers and local staff go to serve Americans overseas.

Across the globe, we serve our fellow citizens during some of their most important moments – births, adoptions, medical emergencies, deaths, arrests, and disasters. Thousands of U.S. citizens are arrested overseas each year, and consular officers help these detained citizens by ensuring they receive adequate medical care and fair treatment under foreign country

standards and by facilitating communication between the citizen and their family.

As with all our consular functions, we are continuously developing tools and processes to make our U.S. citizen services more efficient and effective for our constituents, including a modernized messaging system for Americans in crisis situations, and online registrations of births of U.S. citizen children abroad. We expect the number of U.S. citizens overseas seeking our services will only continue to increase. That prediction is based on our next priority – meeting demand for the unprecedented number of U.S. citizens seeking U.S. passports.

Priority: Maintaining Record Productivity in the Face of Unprecedented Passport Demand.

Demand for U.S. passports is at an all-time high. Currently, 46 percent of Americans have passports, up from 30 percent in 2008 – and 5 percent in 1990. The Bureau of Consular Affairs has adeptly handled this upward trendline over the last several decades, but the post-pandemic spike in passport demand from Americans who want to travel overseas again is truly unprecedented.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2022, we issued a record 22 million passport books and cards. We are on track to surpass that achievement in FY 2023. Our current routine service commitment – 10 to 13 weeks – is an accurate reflection of current demand levels and is a timeframe we publicize widely to allow American travelers to plan accordingly. It is not, however, a processing time we are content to maintain into the foreseeable future. The Bureau's goal is to reduce the passport service commitment to pre-pandemic averages, or approximately 6 to 8 weeks for routine passports and 2 to 3 weeks for expedited applications. Our three-pronged approach to meeting this goal includes growing our staff, investing in technology, and improving the overall service experience, including how we communicate with the American public.

Growing our staff: While we increased our adjudicative staff – 10 percent in the last year alone, with more in the hiring pipeline – our estimates show it will require many more passport specialist positions to meet our goal of returning to pre-pandemic processing times. In our FY 2024 Consular and Border Security Programs budget request, you will note the most significant increase is to our salaries budget, where almost \$100 million will allow us to fill vacancies left over from the pandemic and to add new positions throughout the Bureau of Consular Affairs.

Investing in tech: We are also planning for a service delivery experience that meets our customers' expectations by investing in technology and doubling down on cybersecurity for our legacy systems. For example, as directed in the President's Executive Order on Customer Experience, our goal is to fully launch our Online Passport Renewal program before the end of the year, through which we estimate approximately 5 million Americans will be able to renew their passports entirely online. To that end, we concluded a successful pilot of the Online Passport Renewal program in March, which allowed us to take lessons learned and refine the system for the upcoming public launch. To date, more than 12,000 customers have completed a survey during the limited monthly release with 99% of respondents indicating they were very likely to use the online renewal system in the future. Furthermore, 96% of respondents reported that completion of the application was very easy or somewhat easy.

Deepening Communications with the Public: In addition to targeted social and traditional media messaging to inform the U.S. public about passport processing times, we are working across the State Department on a broad, omnichannel campaign to ensure our shared constituents are armed with the most accurate information about obtaining a U.S. passport and traveling safely overseas. We appreciate the close cooperation we enjoy with Congressional staff, and are happy to continue to provide you with information, graphics, and updates on the passport process for inclusion in your constituent newsletters and communications.

Priority: Continuing to Maximize Efficiency in Visa Services While Safeguarding National Security

In parallel to the spike in U.S. passport demand, we are also experiencing pent-up demand for U.S. visas resulting from the near shutdown of international travel during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In some ways a distant memory, U.S. and foreign restrictions constrained our processing levels for two years or more before those restrictions were lifted. Despite these challenges, our visa services have rebounded and surpassed pre-pandemic processing levels. In FY 2023 so far, the Department has issued 22 percent more nonimmigrant visas than the same period in pre-pandemic 2019. While appointment wait times for visitor visa interviews remain higher than we would like in a few high-demand countries, we have reduced them substantially in recent months, and we are issuing more visitor visas in these countries now than we did before the pandemic. Fiscal year to date, we have issued more than one million additional nonimmigrant visas in our top four visa processing missions alone than during the same period in FY 2019 – a 57 percent increase.

The pandemic and contemporaneous budget shortfalls left many posts significantly understaffed. Thanks to expanded expenditure authorities along with supplemental funding provided by the Congress, we lifted hiring freezes that had been in place until late 2021. It takes time to onboard and train new staff for these national security positions and, working with other bureaus in the Department, we are leveraging those authorities to increase substantially the number of consular adjudicator positions filled in FY2023 and to continue that trend into FY2024, budget permitting.

Since the United States re-opened for travel, the State Department has streamlined visa processing and dedicated more resources to reducing wait times, consistent with national security. These efforts include surging staff overseas to adjudicate visa applications, working with DHS to exercise interview waiver authorities for low-risk visa applicants, and expanding the development and use of IT solutions to take advantage of capacity wherever it exists. We undertook these efforts and continue to pursue continuous

business improvement without any compromise to national security or our obligations to review appropriately all visa applications.

Priority: Investing in Consular Systems and Technology.

We cannot make the enhancements and business improvements detailed above without sustained and significant investments in our IT infrastructure and staff. The commitment and responsibility of the Bureau of Consular Affairs is to maintain and implement the highest cybersecurity standards and to recruit and retain the staff capable of doing so.

To achieve this, the Consular and Border Security Programs FY 2024 request of \$4.5 billion is the largest budget we have ever made. It will allow us to respond to the highest demand for passport services in history and the pent-up demand for visa adjudications, while supporting our efforts to modernize complex IT systems that were built more than 20 years ago.

We continue to need expanded expenditure authorities for consular fees along the lines of those granted at the height of the pandemic. These authorities allow us to direct resources where they need to go to respond to emerging challenges and unexpected fluctuations in demand. We have been able to use fees from surging passport demand to cover U.S. citizens' services costs, not only for high-profile crises such as in Sudan, but also for less well-known crises facing the traveling public, such as administering the repatriation loan program for destitute U.S. citizens stranded overseas. These authorities also allow us to manage unexpected fluctuations in demand, including by using the fees to hire additional officers for surging workloads.

Priority: The People of Consular Affairs

As the House committee responsible for overseeing the federal workforce, you are no doubt as invested in the well-being of the 13,000 foreign affairs professionals in the Bureau of Consular Affairs as I am. Our geographically diverse bureau is home to nearly 1 in 5 civil service employees in the

Department (19.8 percent). The people of Consular Affairs are the truest public servants I have ever known. They work at 29 passport agencies and centers and over 240 overseas posts, where they are the face of the State Department to U.S. citizens, and the face of the United States to millions of foreign nationals.

The nature of consular work is providing direct services. Often, that means the work is extra rewarding – issuing a visa to a student going to their dream school, or a passport to someone so they can bid farewell to an ailing family member; finalizing an adoption for a U.S. family; or helping an American in crisis overseas. As the “front lines” of the Department, the professionals in Consular Affairs worked in person both domestically and overseas during the pandemic to keep serving the public, and the death toll among our colleagues was significant. Whatever you see in world news each day – earthquakes, plane crashes, collapsed buildings – you can rest assured our consular colleagues are there to assist impacted U.S. citizens.

This includes, crucially, our locally employed colleagues around the world, who are not only present to assist Americans in these crises, but also often are living through them personally. They are the institutional knowledge and lifeblood of our operations and we appreciate the attention of Members of Congress, including on this committee, to finding a legislative fix to allow those staff with qualifying, faithful service to immigrate to the United States without delay.

This country has had officials overseas protecting Americans since before it had a constitution. In fact, this responsibility is the reason we have missions overseas, and it is our most important shared responsibility. It is an honor to lead this bureau and to engage further in discussion with you on the issues that affect us and the public we all serve.