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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,

Over the last several months, I have heard from many constituents facing significant delays in the renewal and application processes for their passports. Many of my constituents are simply asking for help with checking the status of their passport or why the application is delayed even though they may have paid for the expedited process. These delays can lead to not only higher stress but also a loss of money for people.

We are aware of the State Department's ongoing efforts to modernize the renewal system through the Online Passport Renewal (OPR) system and appreciate these attempts to bring passport services into the 21st Century. We also appreciate the State Department's willingness to admit the extent of the backlog. However, the lack of communication and transparency with congressional offices and constituents leaves us wondering if the Department has a plan to address the increasing backlog. As taxpayers of the United States, our constituents deserve to know what is happening to their applications and have the means to communicate with those who are processing their applications so they can at least know their personal information is safe. Our government works best when constituents have faith in the institutions they come to rely on, which is fostered best by transparency and communication.

Additionally, in my office, we have seen a nearly 100 percent increase in passport casework and a decline in response time from passport offices anytime one of my caseworkers reach out for a status update or response to a question. Previously, my office would experience an average response time of about 48 hours for emails. However, the average response time is now closer to a week. My staff were also told about how the passport offices are starting to triage applications and that they should not call the National Passport Center for assistance unless the planned travel of the constituent they are helping is less than 10 days away. They have also experienced challenges in scheduling congressional appointments at passport agency offices. This is the first time since the Summer 2021 that my staff have had consistent troubles with scheduling congressional appointments.

Finally, I fully reiterate the call made by my colleagues in asking for an improvement in internal communications between individual passport agencies and external communications with congressional offices and our constituents. The passport agencies should provide clearer information and set appropriate expectations on the turnaround times for new passport applications and renewals so constituents can better plan their travel.

To help my constituents and my staff understand the ongoing passport delays, please provide answers to the following questions:

1. Has the implementation of the OPR system led to unforeseen challenges in processing applications on the part of the agency's staff?
2. Should individuals seeking to renew their passport avoid using the OPR system for the time being and instead renew their passport through traditional means?
3. Are there plans to extend the operating hours of passport offices to help address the backlog?
 - a. If so, would this include an increase in the number of passport appointments available to individuals?
4. Although plans were announced to open a third call center for the National Passport Information Center, the current plans have the facility opening in late June, two months into the summer travel season. Are there plans to expedite the opening of this call center?
5. Additionally, are there plans to open additional processing facilities to create more appointments and process passports faster?
 - a. If so, when will these facilities be opened?
 - b. If not, what are the constraints to opening more processing facilities?
6. What are the major factors in the decline in average response time from passport offices to outreach from congressional offices?
7. Are there plans to improve response times to outreach from congressional offices?
 - a. If so, what are the plans?
8. Under the current circumstances, what is the expected timeline for regular and expedited passport applications and renewals?

Thank you for your consideration and response to these questions.

Sincerely,



Brad R. Wenstrup, D.P.M.
Member of Congress