



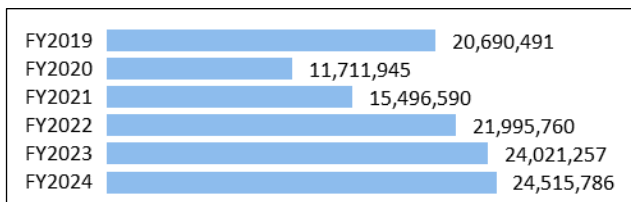
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State Department Passport Services: Background and Issues for Congress

Background

The U.S. Department of State (DOS) defines a passport as “an internationally recognized travel document that verifies the identity and nationality of the bearer.” Congress has vested authority in DOS to grant, issue, and verify U.S. passports. DOS data indicate that the number of passports it issues on an annual basis has increased substantially since the mid-1990s. DOS’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 FY2024, CA issued 24.5 million passports, which exceeds the number of passports issued in FY2023 by nearly 500,000 and marks a new annual record (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1. U.S. Passports Issued, FY2019-FY2024



Source: State Department, Bureau of Consular Affairs “Reports and Statistics,” <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/about-us/reports-and-statistics.html>.

Passport Application Adjudication and Processing Steps

Current DOS regulations require first-time applicants for a U.S. passport, along with most applicants under age 18 seeking to renew their passport, to submit their application in person at a passport acceptance facility. There are over 7,400 passport acceptance facilities across the United States. They include post offices, clerks of court, public libraries, and other local government offices. DOS advises those intending to travel in less than three weeks to make an appointment at a passport agency or center (described in the following paragraph) rather than visit a passport acceptance facility. Those applicants seeking to renew their passport are often eligible to do so online or through the 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 DOS servers, and transmitting application packages to passport agencies and centers for adjudication. CA currently administers 29 passport agencies and centers across the United States and has announced plans to open six additional agencies (for more detail, see the “Passport Services in 2023 and 2024: From Processing Delays to

Service Improvements” heading). Once a passport application is approved, information is electronically transmitted to a print center 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. In addition to adjudicating applications transmitted from lockboxes, many passport agencies and centers offer in-person passport services by appointment to those who require a passport quickly for urgent international travel needs.

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.

Passport Services in 2023 and 2024: From Processing Delays to Service Improvements

U.S. citizens applying for a passport faced delays throughout much of 2023, as processing times for routine applications increased from 6-9 weeks in January 2023 to 10-13 weeks by March. During a congressional hearing in June 2023, Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs Rena Bitter attributed several factors to longer processing times. These factors included attrition within CA’s passport adjudication workforce following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and continued in-person work requirements, along with pent-up demand for passports among the American public after COVID-19-related international travel restrictions were relaxed. In December 2023, DOS announced that it had successfully met its goal of returning 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.

As the 2023 processing delays have receded, DOS has advanced several policies in 2024 intended to improve passport services. In some cases, congressional action has contributed to DOS’s work in this area. Section 6104 of the Department of State Authorization Act of 2023 (Division F of P.L. 118-31) required the Secretary of State to submit a strategy to Congress describing how DOS could “provide [U.S.] residents living in a significant population center more than a 5-hour drive from a passport agency with urgent, in-person passport services, including the possibility of building new passport agencies.” Secretary of State Antony Blinken submitted this strategy to Congress on June

18, 2024. The strategy revealed DOS's intention to open six new passport agencies located in Salt Lake City, UT; Kansas City, MO; Orlando, FL; Charlotte, NC; San Antonio, TX; and Cincinnati, OH. In addition to planning these new agencies, DOS has worked to increase the availability of urgent in-person passport services through other means, as the Charleston, South Carolina Passport Center began offering appointments for these services for the first time in August 2024.

On December 13, 2021, President Biden issued Executive Order (E.O.) 14058, titled *Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery To Rebuild Trust in Government*. E.O. 14058 required the Secretary of State to “design and deliver a new online passport renewal experience that does not require any physical documents to be mailed.” Secretary Blinken announced in September 2024 that DOS was making its online passport renewal system (OPR) fully available to the public. DOS previously offered OPR on a more limited basis through pilot programs and beta testing dating back to at least 2022. DOS has noted that although OPR offers considerable convenience by eliminating the need for eligible applicants to take physical passport photos, fill out a paper application, and mail these and other required materials, OPR does not enable the applicant to obtain a new passport more quickly than if they did so by mail. Additionally, OPR eligibility criteria are currently limited to applicants who are age 25 or older, renewing a passport issued between 2009 and 2015, and not requesting expedited processing, among other requirements. Assistant Secretary Bitter characterized the OPR launch as a “first step” and said DOS intends to make this option more widely available.

When announcing the full launch of OPR in September 2024, Secretary Blinken noted that the “average routine passport” was being processed “well under the advertised [6-8] weeks processing times.” On October 3, 2024, DOS announced that advertised processing times had been reduced from 6-8 weeks to 4-6 weeks for routine applications. The announcement further stated that expedited passport processing remained at 2-3 weeks. Congress strengthened oversight of this matter in 2023, as Section 6102 of the aforementioned DOS Authorization Act of 2023 requires DOS to submit quarterly reports to Congress regarding processing times. These reports have generally indicated that efforts to hire additional staff to adjudicate passport applications, the use of staff overtime, and adjudication process improvements have enabled DOS to issue both routine and expedited passports more quickly than the processing times DOS published online. The reports have added that DOS intends to further leverage direct hire authority that the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) provided it in November 2023 to hire more adjudicative staff.

DOS has launched additional efforts intended to improve passport services that in some cases appear to reflect congressional priorities. For example, DOS informed Congress in August 2024 that it had updated its online passport status website to provide more detailed information to applicants seeking to learn of the status of their pending applications. Section 6106 of the DOS

Authorization Act of 2023 similarly called on DOS to modernize this website to offer additional detail to applicants. DOS further noted in August 2024 that it was transmitting passport renewal reminder e-mails to passport holders when their passport is one year away from expiring. Section 6110 of the DOS Authorization Act of 2023 required DOS to take such action.

Issues for Congress

As Congress conducts oversight and potentially considers other options to direct or shape DOS's ongoing efforts to enhance passport services, Members may consider the following issues:

Passport Agency Expansion. DOS indicated to Congress that it plans to spend \$98.3 million for initial costs for the six planned new passport agencies. According to DOS, such funding will cover costs including design, construction, IT infrastructure, furniture, and security infrastructure. DOS intends to open these new agencies in 2026. In a 2023 report to Congress, DOS noted that building, equipping, and staffing new passport agencies could be time-intensive, citing issues such as the approvals process for construction and the effort required to vet and train new staff. Congress may seek to determine whether additional authorities and/or resources are required to enable DOS to stand up these new agencies within its stated timeframes.

Modernization and Security. Since 2020, congressional engagement on passport services has focused largely on ensuring DOS eliminated COVID-19 pandemic-related processing delays and modernized and improved customer service. DOS asserts that its modernization efforts are intended in part to make consular operations more secure. Congress may seek more information from DOS as to how, if at all, passport services modernization addresses relevant security concerns, which may include protecting personally identifiable information of applicants and ensuring those seeking to obtain a passport illegally are not able to do so.

Passport Application and Execution Fees (PAEF). Congress authorizes DOS to collect fees for the filing of each passport application (application fee) and executing each such application (execution fee). While DOS was previously required to remit these fees to the Treasury, in 2022 Congress authorized DOS to retain these fees indefinitely and expend fees deposited in FY2022 on providing consular services. DOS is required to secure budget authority from Congress to expend fees deposited after FY2022. Authorities for other passport fees and surcharges, including the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative surcharge and the passport security surcharge, make the collections available to DOS until expenditure and do not require Congress to provide further budget authority. Congress may consider possible benefits and drawbacks of making PAEF proceeds available until expenditure or of keeping the existing arrangement in place. Alternatively, should Congress find that DOS no longer requires the PAEF to provide sufficient consular services, it may again require DOS to remit these fees to the Treasury.

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