

**Statement for the Record**  
from the  
National Federation of Federal Employees, IAMAW  
for the  
Committee on Oversight and Accountability  
U.S. House of Representatives  
*Hearing on Federal Agency Backlogs*  
June 21, 2023

An Open Statement to the Members of the Committee:

Americans were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in many ways, although some effects received more publicity than others. An office that was affected by COVID-19 that may not immediately come to mind for many is the office of passport services. Not only did the pandemic itself impact the workings of this office, but the Trump hiring freeze in 2017 and 2018 contributed to the still occurring backlog in passport production. By 2019, the Trump hiring freeze had already caused 200 staff vacancies, an 86% increase in backlogged applications, and a 200% increase in the average processing time. Consequently, passport wait times increased from 4 to 6 weeks to 6 to 8 weeks.

**Recent History of Wait Times**

As of March 2023, the routine application process for passports was 10-13 weeks, and the expedited application process was 7-9 weeks. The recent winter season demonstrated historically high application numbers, with the passport office at times receiving over 50,000 applications. Today, passport wait times remain high and the office remains backlogged. Throughout the fluctuating circumstances of the pandemic, unprecedented events led to a pent-up need for passports. A general lack of staff and the available staff suffering burnout due to required overtime, as well as outdated technology and systems are key contributing factors to making processing difficult. Also, many applicants waited until international borders reopened before ordering or renewing a passport, which caused overwhelming numbers of applications.

These drawbacks could be minimized with an addition of approximately 200 new hires. However, even if this influx of hires was obtained immediately, there would still be a delay until late 2023, as these hires would face a steep learning curve and intensive training. This, coupled with expedited transition opportunities into permanent positions, could be critical to

diminishing backlog and maintaining an acceptable and sustainable processing time and procedure.

### **Wait Times Throughout the Year**

There is also a fluctuation in wait times throughout the year. Springtime is when passport requests spike as applicants realize the need for a passport when considering summer travel plans. During winter, wait times fall as demand for passports decreases. However, as the international borders reopened after the pandemic, there was once again an unprecedented spike in passport demand during typically slower parts of the year, leading to the current backlog. ***If Congress wants to reduce or eliminate complaints from constituents regarding passport wait times, then congressional support is needed to upgrade processing systems and ensure that staffing levels return to full capacity by adding another 200 federal employees.*** Until then, passport demand will remain high – even with mandatory overtime – due to historically high applications, low staffing levels, and antiquated technology.

### **Changes Occurring**

This leads to the inquiry of what is being done to decrease wait times and help the passport office reduce the current backlog. The basics are that the office can benefit from more training, expanded hiring (such as support for the passport trainee program to continue the flow of new recruits), and improvement of procedures and technology. Additionally, the contract workforce, which is roughly equal to the federal employee workforce within passport services, is required to complete a full year of training, which is not feasible for the current circumstances.

The passport office is a small one compared to other offices throughout the government, but the weight and necessity of this office is large. No shortcuts should be taken while working to improve this office, and care should be taken to increase flexibility of resources to meet demands, investment in technology, and standard maintenance.

### **Remote Work and Technology Improvements**

Recently, passport processing times have been attributed to remote work. However, remote work in this department is only feasible with the new Online Passport Renewal (OPR) process. However, due to technology failures, the program is currently shut down. Passport employees are currently unable to telework due to the processing of applicant personal information, applicant vetting, and inadequate systems which would permit secure remote OPR processing. Laptops have been issued to staff and teleworking has been piloted for certain training sessions to be conducted remotely, however, this is infrequent and neither increases nor decreases passport processing operations. With a systems upgrade, remote processing can become a reality.

## **Effects of the Trump Hiring Freeze**

The passport agency is still dealing with the aftereffects of the 2017-2018 Trump hiring freeze. There were two ways in which this freeze significantly impacted the backlog. First, it impeded the ability to replace Passport personnel as they left service. Although any agency would feel the impact of such a severe hiring decrease, passport services were especially impacted. With the extended time it takes to train new employees – skills and services training can take around a year to complete – each hiring delay creates a domino effect throughout the agency. As passport demand rose 36% from 2016-2019, Americans and passport agents suffered from the freeze.

Second, it interfered with the ability of the Passport Pathways hiring program to convert trainees to permanent employees. An abundance of effort goes into the vetting and application process for passports, and the process must be conducted by a capable and well-trained staff. This is where the Pathways Program comes in, as it serves as a way to train staff to a high degree of qualification and ensures a solid line of succession. The training process takes one year and upon graduation participants are qualified for a permanent position. However, during the hiring freeze, the passport agency lost many qualified job applicants, further contributing to the backlog faced today.

## **Growing Staff Numbers**

Primarily, an addition of 200 new hires could help work through the current backlog and long wait times. With the induction of new and qualified staff into the passport agency, more help will be available to work through the influx of passport applications. However, this will not be an immediate solution. Even if 200 new staff members were hired today, they would still need to go through an extensive training process to properly handle sensitive material and maintain security standards. This means that there would not be significant change in the backlog until late 2023, proving that maintaining a consistently full Pathways Program with an expedited transition option is crucial to maintain low backlogs and responsiveness to be ready for unprecedented changes.

## **Contractors and Federal Workers**

Within Passport services, the contract workforce is about equal to the federal employee workforce. Within the agency, contractors are mostly responsible for performing tasks such as data entry and printing. During the initial COVID response, disruptions in passport processing occurred as contractors struggled to maintain their workforce within the agency.

Today, it is not practical for the contract workforce to be expected to complete the year of training required of the federal employees handling the sensitive information within

passport production. The use of a half-contractor workforce limits the flexibility of passport services when demand becomes high. Although funds may initially be saved with the use of contractors, the initial cost eventually becomes higher as federal employees must work overtime, there is a higher turnover due to burnout, and processing delays increase as the passport workforce attempts to combat these issues.

### **Burnout**

While recovering from the damage after the hiring freeze, passport management was forced to resort to mandatory overtime. This also resulted in cancellation of training and other investments, leading to an overall burnout and increased vacancies in an already suffering environment.

### **Effects of COVID**

The backlog was not fully in effect at the beginning of the pandemic, as some staff were unable to work due to COVID but passport demand was also down. As the pandemic continued, passport offices resorted once again to mandatory overtime and extended hours. Eventually, the demand became too great with the number of workers available, and even with mandatory overtime, a high backlog and high wait times persisted.

Contrary to the political statements made by some unaware Members of Congress, Passport personnel do not telework or remote work because of the sensitive nature of the work involved in processing passport information. Therefore, remote working by federal employees because of the response to COVID is irrelevant regarding passport wait times. Passport employees have never teleworked or remote worked except for extremely rare training online training sessions.

### **Solutions**

Solutions to this problem are not mandatory overtime or decreasing investments, but rather a complete overhaul of the technology. Over \$59 million has been spent over the last 15+ years on technology by the current Consular Systems and Technology (CST) office without implementation of new systems to interface with current database software. Respectfully submitted, the Committee is advised to undertake enhanced oversight of the CST office to the extent the improvements to technology are properly vetted and quickly implemented. Enhanced technology implementation is the core solution to diminishing delays and backlogs. The impact of technology improvements cannot be understated in terms of the future success of timely passport processing.

Second, more training, as low staffing is often cited as a reason to deny training opportunities when in fact more training opportunities should be offered to increase staff. Additionally, expanded hiring would benefit the agency. Expanded hiring with an emphasis on

support for the passport trainee program and more merit-based hiring could help alleviate these problems.

Third, along with an increase in hiring, improved technology would expedite passport production and streamline the process. Investments in new technology must be made in order to improve the current system and decrease the unnecessary gaps in processing times because of the technology.

Finally, though it is a relatively small agency, passport services are deeply important to the American people, as it carries the burden of maintaining capabilities and standards of international travel for personal use and commerce. Shortcuts are out of the question, and the full consideration must be given to this office in terms of maximizing the flexibility of federal employee resources, investing in technology, and maintaining strict standards for national and international security.