

July 12, 2023

Ms. Naz Durakoglu
Assistant Secretary
Bureau of Legislative Affairs
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520-0099

Dear Assistant Secretary Durakoglu:

Thank you for your June 1, 2023 response to my inquiry regarding the State Department's efforts to address numerous issues regarding the processing of passport applications. I appreciate your explanation of the actions that the State Department has taken to address the unprecedented demand for passports. I express my sincere gratitude to the federal employees who are working overtime to reduce the backlog of applications and to allow our constituents to travel.

Unfortunately, my office continues to be inundated with requests from frustrated constituents experiencing significant delays in the processing of their applications. I am deeply troubled by reports of agency unresponsiveness. Countless constituents have been unable to obtain any information to help them make important decisions regarding their travel plans and, left in the dark about the status of their applications, miss travel booked far in advance. Additionally, since my initial inquiry on March 30, 2023, I have begun to receive concerning accounts from constituents who have experienced difficulties at passport acceptance facilities and separately, from those that have received contradictory information from private passport services.

In my March 30 letter, I raised the issue of a lack of responsiveness from passport agency officials. While I understand and appreciate that there has been a significant improvement in hold times with the National Passport Information Center's (NPIC) public phone line, I am dismayed to report that the overall lack of responsiveness to inquiries, in particular congressional inquiries, has continued to intensify. Congressional staff are unable to reach many passport agencies by phone and are waiting over a month for written responses in some cases, despite regular follow-up.

In an effort to better inform and serve my constituents, I would appreciate responses to the following:

- **How does State allocate incoming applications when most agencies are already overwhelmed by inquiries?**
- **How does State identify, prioritize, and address passport agencies overwhelmed by inquiries?**

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- **What is State's preferred method for congressional staff to communicate quickly and effectively with passport officials on behalf of constituents?**

There also appears to be a disconnect between the NPIC and passport agencies regarding the process for obtaining the status of applications. This disconnect appears to disproportionately affect applicants with imminent travel that wish to upgrade their applications to expedited service. For example, constituents report that they have provided their credit card information to NPIC for payment for expedited processing, but upon my office's inquiry, the agency requests their credit card information again. Understandably, this raises concerns as to NPIC's management of sensitive constituent information. **Please provide an explanation for how NPIC and passport agencies gather, share, and retain this information and why NPIC duplicates requests for credit card information via congressional offices.**

NPIC's relationship with local passport agencies is crucial in addressing problems with passport appointments and processing. Due to limited appointment availability, many of my constituents are expected to race across the country for an in-person appointment at a passport agency with availability. Notably, those without the means to do so are left at a disadvantage. **What is NPIC doing to ensure that Marylanders are not trekking to Miami, for instance, while Floridians fly to Washington, D.C. for appointments?**

Further, I have received numerous reports from constituents that passport acceptance facilities are further exacerbating their difficulties. I am aware of an alarming number of instances in which passport applications submitted via an acceptance facility (e.g., Post Offices) were not registered in State Department records until weeks or months later. Even more troubling are reports that some facilities *refused* to accept passport applications, citing the current backlog. I am raising these issues with the U.S. Postal Service as well, and **ask that State please advise as to what it is doing to correct these actions.**

I was also deeply concerned to learn of several instances in which, after being advised that no emergency passport appointments were available via public and congressional inquiries, some individuals have been able to obtain passports by paying exorbitant fees through private services. Such a practice would suggest that State endorses a practice in which applicants with economic means may essentially pay their way to the front of the line. **Please advise in detail how private passport services are able to obtain appointments under these conditions.**

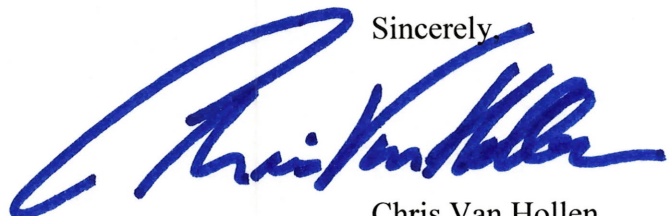
Lastly, in a recent briefing with the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs, congressional staff was advised that State anticipates it will take at least another six months to clear the current passport application backlog. **Please explain how State arrived at this timeline and whether efforts are underway to resolve the backlog in less time.** As I noted in my previous letter, short-term solutions have not been able to resolve the significant lag in processing applications. Fundamental overhauls to this system may be needed in order to prevent further delays now and in the future.

While I understand the challenges presented by the surge in demand, Marylanders, particularly those who have invested considerable time and money in planning international travel, deserve transparency and regular updates from the State Department regarding the steps it is taking to mitigate the situation.

Again, I am grateful for all that State Department employees are undertaking and appreciate your attention to this matter on behalf of my constituents. I would appreciate a response by August 4, 2023. Please direct all correspondence to [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. Thank you for your assistance

Sincerely,



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

[REDACTED]