PASSPORT PROCESSING

State Department Should Identify Milestones and Resource Needs for Its Plans to Avoid Future Delays

Why GAO Did This Study

Issuance of U.S. passports is among the State Department's most visible and important public services. Moreover, its timeliness in adjudicating passport applications and issuing passports affects American citizens as well as the travel and leisure industry. In fiscal year 2023, State experienced a passport processing backlog, which led to substantially longer processing times than before the COVID-19 pandemic.

GAO was asked to review State's passport processing backlog. In addition, a House Report included a provision for GAO to study passport processing times. This report examines (1) the time frames for State's processing of passport applications in fiscal year 2023 and the effects of processing delays on applicants; (2) factors that contributed to processing delays in fiscal year 2023; (3) State's actions to mitigate the backlog; and (4) the extent of State's long-term planning to prevent future delays.

GAO reviewed State passport processing data and documents related to managing delays. GAO also interviewed State officials and visited or met with staff at four processing centers. GAO selected these centers on the basis of factors such as size, location, and volume of applications processed in 2023.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that State (1) define milestones for the Transformation Roadmap and (2) determine the resources needed to successfully implement it. State agreed with both recommendations.

View GAO-25-107164. For more information, contact Tatiana Winger at (202) 512-4128 or wingert@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Unusually long processing times in fiscal year 2023 had various negative effects on U.S. passport applicants. Processing of routine passport applications took more than 4 weeks longer than before the COVID-19 pandemic and expedited applications took more than 2 weeks longer. These delays' effects on passport applicants included delayed or cancelled travel. Several factors contributed to the processing delays. One primary factor was staff shortages stemming from a hiring freeze in fiscal year 2017. Other factors included unexpected fluctuations in application volume. For example, State received 21.6 million applications in fiscal year 2023, nearly 2 million more than it had expected.

Backlog of Passport Applications at National Passport Center, Portsmouth, NH, 2023

Source: Department of State. | GAO-25-107164

State implemented short-term measures to mitigate the processing backlog in fiscal year 2023. For example, State required passport specialists to work up to 24 hours of overtime per month in fiscal year 2023. State data show that specialists worked more than 250,000 hours of overtime during the fiscal year.

State is developing a long-term plan, known as the Transformation Roadmap, for projects to modernize processing and avoid future delays, but it has not identified milestones or resource needs for all of the projects. As of November 2024, State had developed 83 projects that included improving information technology and opening six new passport agencies. As of December 2024, State had defined milestones to measure progress for 24 projects it considered necessary for the roadmap's success, but it has not done so for the remaining 59. In addition, State has not identified the resources needed to fully implement the roadmap. State officials told GAO that the greatest risks to implementing the roadmap were insufficient staffing and funding. GAO's prior work has shown that defining milestones for agency reform efforts and determining planned projects' costs (e.g., staffing, funding, and other resources) are critical to the reforms' and projects' success. Taking such actions would better position State to complete its efforts to reduce the likelihood of future delays in passport processing and their negative effects on U.S. travelers and the travel industry.

United States Government Accountability Office