



March 2025

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.

PASSPORT PROCESSING

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

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.

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Abbreviations

FAM	Foreign Affairs Manual
OPR	Online Passport Renewal system

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March 27, 2025

Congressional Addressees

Issuing U.S. passports is among the State Department’s most visible and critical services. Moreover, State’s timeliness in adjudicating passport applications and issuing passports directly affects American citizens and the travel and leisure industry. Over the last several decades, the percentage of Americans with passports has risen dramatically, from 5 percent in 1990 to 46 percent in 2023.¹

In fiscal years 2020 through 2022—the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic—Americans submitted relatively few applications for new or renewed passports. However, in fiscal year 2023, State received unprecedented numbers of applications and developed a significant backlog in processing them.

You asked us to review the causes of the passport applications backlog and identify recommended solutions. Additionally, House Report 118-146 includes a provision for us to study passport processing times and provide recommendations to reduce them.² 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 short-term actions to mitigate the backlog; and (4) the extent of State’s long-term planning to prevent future delays.

To examine State’s time frames for processing of passport applications in fiscal year 2023, we analyzed State’s Bureau of Consular Affairs data on the number of weeks required to process regular and expedited passport applications for fiscal years 2019—the year before the COVID-19 pandemic—and 2023.³ To examine the effects of processing delays on passport applicants, we interviewed representatives of three travel

¹Department of State, *Written Statement of Rena Bitter, Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, Before the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. Hearing on June 7, 2023.*

²The House Report also includes a provision regarding processing times for visas. We are conducting a separate review in response to that provision.

³For the purposes of this report, State’s processing of passport applications includes processing of applications for both new and renewed passports.

associations—the U.S. Travel Association, Airlines for America, and the American Automobile Association. We selected these organizations because their representation of both travelers and the travel industry would enable them to offer balanced perspectives on the delays' effects. The perspectives of the representatives we interviewed are not generalizable to all travel associations. However, they provide illustrative examples of, and important insights about, the delays' effects on applicants.

To examine the factors that contributed to processing delays in fiscal year 2023, we analyzed State management memos and data. These included data on annual workloads, such as workloads for processing routine and expedited applications; on passport processing time frames; on attrition; on applications pending adjudication; and on the number of passport processing specialists. We assessed the data's reliability by, among other things, reviewing State data dictionaries and documentation on quality and accuracy processes for relevant databases. On the basis of these steps, we determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of our reporting objectives.

To examine the short-term actions State took to mitigate the backlog, we analyzed State documentation such as workload plans and reports as well as management memos regarding policy and procedure changes. We also met with State officials in headquarters and at passport agencies to discuss these actions.

To examine the extent of State's long-term planning to prevent future processing delays, we analyzed documentation of the bureau's plans for modernizing passport operations, including documentation showing various workstreams and project management tools State is using to track progress. We assessed State's efforts against leading practices for tracking progress in implementing reform efforts and developing reliable cost estimates.

In addition, to address each of our objectives, we interviewed Consular Affairs officials and staff at four selected passport agencies.⁴ We met in person with officials at the Charleston Passport Center in Charleston,

⁴State officials adjudicate passports primarily at passport agencies and centers. Passport agencies are smaller, local branches that handle in-person applicants and smaller volumes of applications, while passport centers deal with larger volumes of applications. For the purposes of this report, we refer to both the agencies and the centers as passport agencies.

South Carolina; the Miami Passport Agency in Miami, Florida; and the National Passport Center in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. We also met virtually with staff at the Honolulu Passport Agency in Honolulu, Hawaii. We chose these locations on the basis of factors such as highest and lowest numbers of staff, rates of attrition, and volume of applications processed in fiscal year 2023. At each passport agency, we met with State employees, including directors, supervisors, and passport specialists, and with contractor managers and staff. The perspectives of those we interviewed are not generalizable to all State or contractor officials and staff. However, the interviews provided illustrative examples of, and important insights about, the processing delays' effects on applicants and State employees; factors that contributed to the delays; and the development and implementation of State's long-term plans to prevent future delays.

We conducted this performance audit from November 2023 to March 2025 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

U.S. law authorizes the Secretary of State to issue passports, which certify the holder's identity and U.S. citizenship, facilitate the holder's travel abroad, and may be valid for up to 10 years.⁵ The Deputy Assistant Secretary for Passport Services oversees the Passport Services Directorate in State's Bureau of Consular Affairs. Passport Services manages passport operations at headquarters and 27 domestic passport agencies.

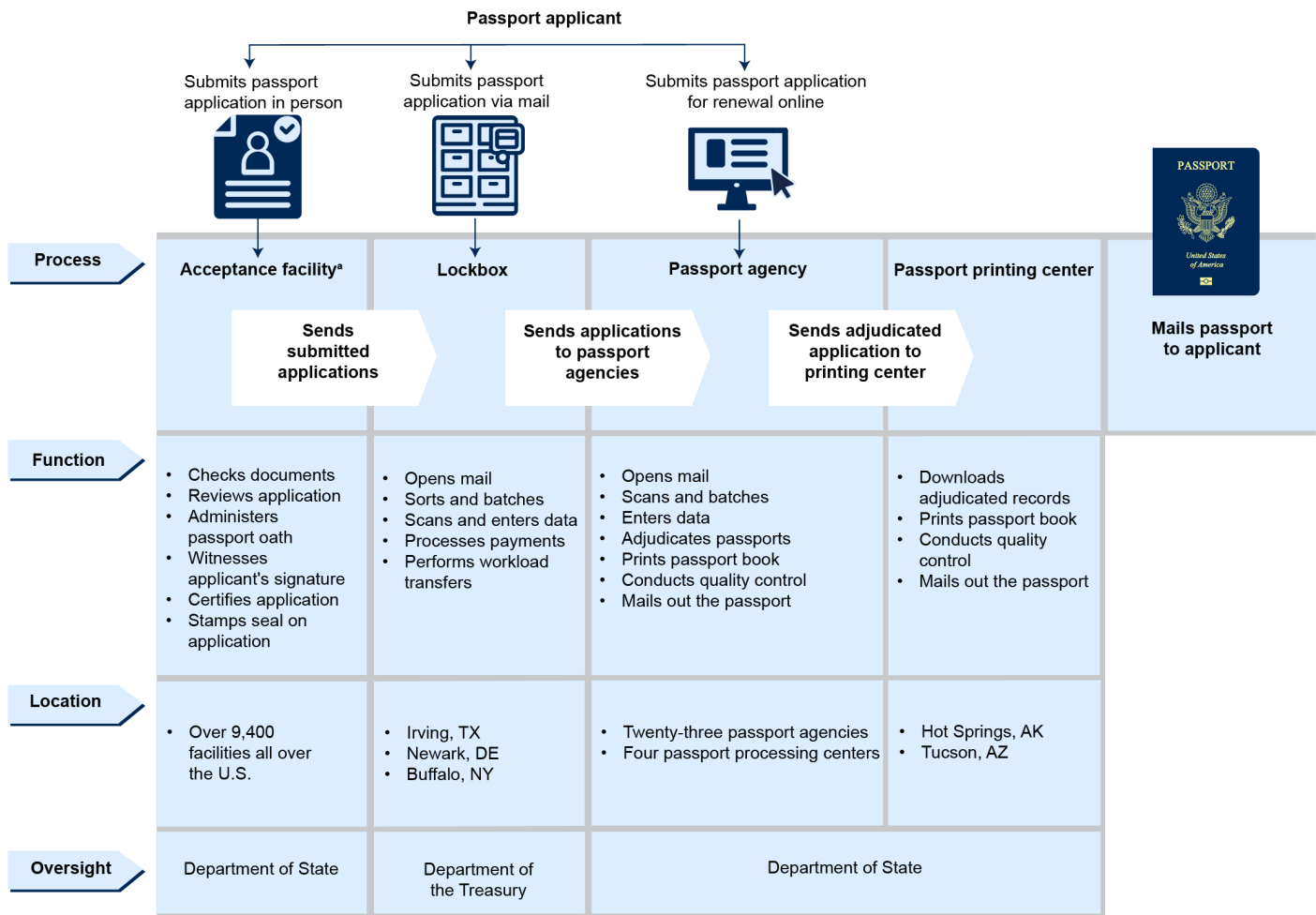
U.S. citizens submit passport applications to State by mail, online, or in person. During a process called adjudication, a passport specialist examines each application to determine whether the applicant should receive a passport. The specialist is responsible for reviewing each applicant's identification and citizenship documents to verify the applicant's identity and U.S. citizenship. The specialist also examines each application to detect potential indicators of passport fraud. In addition, the specialist compares the applicant's information against

⁵State also issues passports to noncitizen U.S. nationals—individuals who, though not citizens of the United States, owe permanent allegiance to the United States. See 8 U.S.C. §§ 1408 and 1452.

databases that help identify individuals who may not qualify for a U.S. passport. Because passport adjudication is primarily a paper-based process, applications must be adjudicated in person at passport agencies to safeguard national security and personally identifiable information. Some passport record-keeping and authentication processes also rely on in-office processes, such as scanning and archiving documentation.

Figure 1 summarizes the passport application, adjudication, and production process, from submission of the application to printing and mailing of the passport.

Figure 1: Passport Application, Adjudication, and Production Process



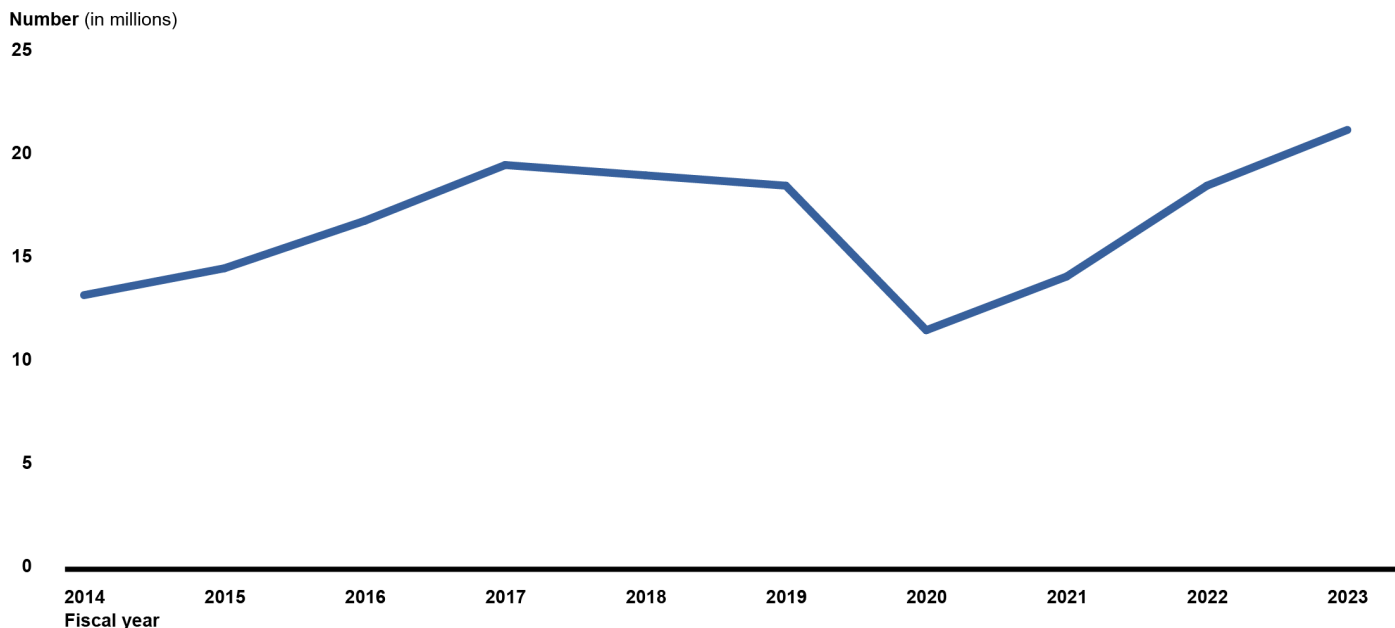
Sources: GAO analysis of Department of State data; icons from hacastudio/stock.adobe.com, ylivdesign/stock.adobe.com, tatiana/stock.adobe.com, AFD/stock.adobe.com, GAO. | GAO-25-107164

^aA relatively small number of passport applications are also submitted in person at passport agencies. Applicants are required to demonstrate imminent travel plans to set an appointment for such services at one of the issuing agency's public counters.

State's website provides the public with estimates of the length of time required to process a passport application, which State refers to as the service commitment time frame. As demand for passports fluctuates during the year, State may adjust the time frame to reflect these changes. State documents instances when processing of an application exceeds the service commitment time frame that was in place when the application was received. State considers the application to be at risk of exceeding the time frame if an application is adjudicated after a target date that would guarantee the passport can be mailed within the service commitment.

State data show that the number of passport applications State received dropped steeply from fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2020 before increasing to a record level in fiscal year 2023 (see fig. 2).

Figure 2: Total Number of Passport Applications Received, Fiscal Years 2014–2023



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

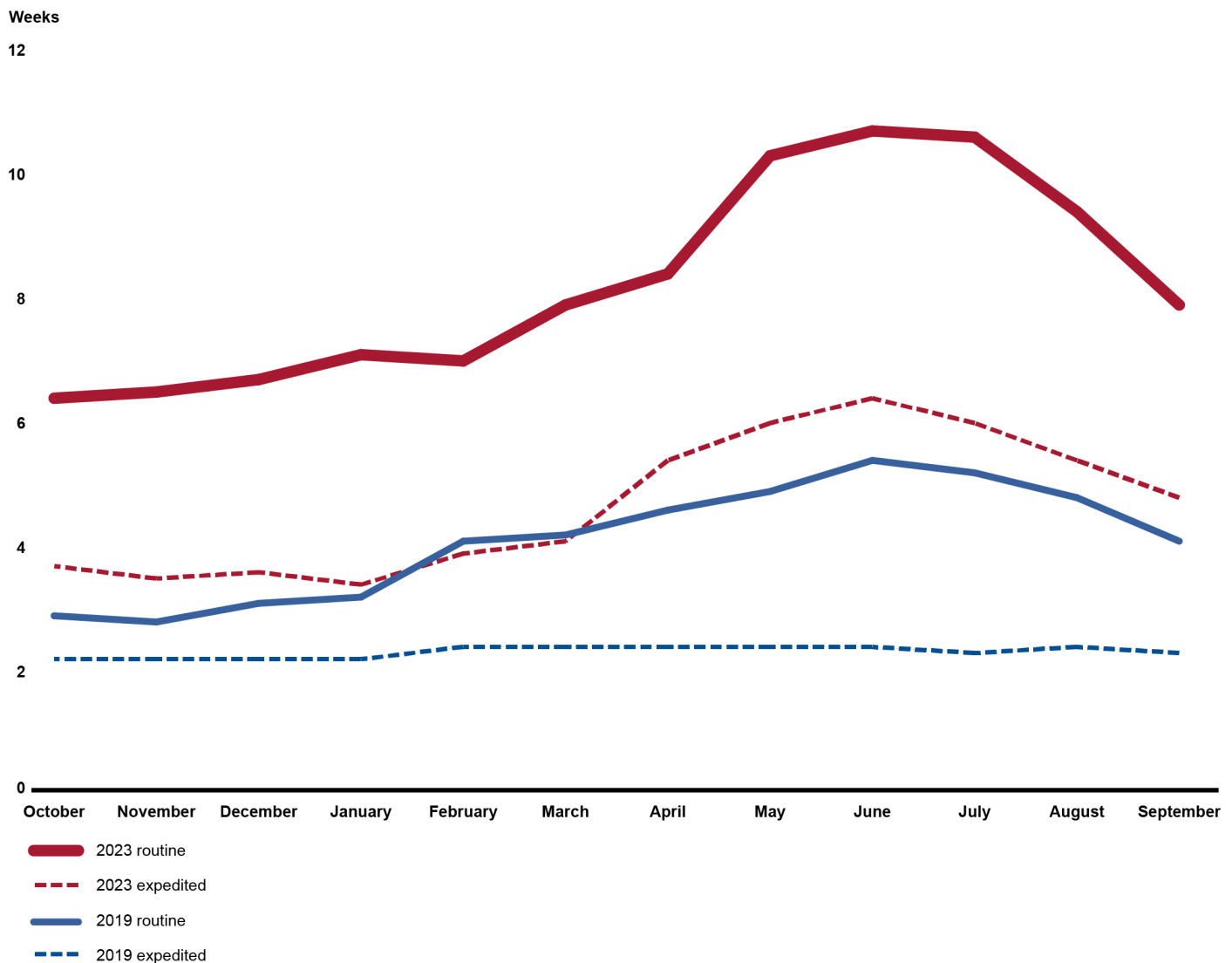
Unusually Long Processing Times in Fiscal Year 2023 Had Various Negative Effects on Passport Applicants

Passport Processing in Fiscal Year 2023 Took Longer Than in Fiscal Year 2019

In fiscal year 2023, State's processing of passport applications took, on average, more than 4 weeks longer for routine applications and more than 2 weeks longer for expedited applications than in fiscal year 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic. At the height of the backlog, from May through July 2023, processing of routine applications averaged 10.5 weeks and processing of expedited applications averaged 6.1 weeks. During the same months in fiscal year 2019, processing of routine applications averaged 5.2 weeks and processing of expedited applications averaged 2.4 weeks (see fig. 3).⁶

⁶According to State's website as of March 2025, expected processing times were 4 to 6 weeks for routine passport applications and 2 to 3 weeks for expedited ones.

Figure 3: Average Passport Processing Times, in Weeks, Fiscal Years 2019 and 2023



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

Note: The processing times shown are the average number of weeks that were needed to process passport applications submitted each month. These times do not include time needed for the mailing of applications to the State Department or of passports to applicants.

According to State data, during the height of the backlog in May 2023, adjudication of 31 percent of applications either exceeded or risked exceeding the service commitment time frame, published on State’s website, of 10 to 13 weeks for routine applications. Similarly, in May, June, and July 2023, up to 3.1 million applications were pending

adjudication at the end of each month. In contrast, up to 1 million applications were pending adjudication at the end of those months in 2019.

Processing Delays' Effects on Passport Applicants Included Interrupted Travel

The passport processing delays in fiscal year 2023 had several negative effects on applicants. Representatives of selected travel industry groups told us that after the U.S. government lifted COVID-19 travel restrictions, demand for international travel surged. However, as a result of the processing delays, many U.S. travelers had to delay or cancel international trips because they could not receive their passports in time, according to the representatives. According to travel industry officials, travel insurance did not cover these trip delays or cancellations, leaving travelers unprotected from financial loss. Travel industry group officials also noted that, facing longer than average processing times, some travelers were reluctant to relinquish their passport and vital records required for a passport application, due to other potential needs for identification or proof of citizenship.

Fraudulent Passport Appointments

State officials told us that because demand for appointments at passport agencies exceeded availability in 2023, some customers unknowingly purchased fraudulent appointments through social media sites. For example, appointments for the Miami passport agency were selling for \$175 to \$350, according to the officials. State officials said these customers did not learn that the appointments were fraudulent until they arrived at the agencies.

State officials expressed regret at having had to turn away applicants who believed they had paid for real appointments. Although State charges fees for processing passport applications, it does not charge for appointments, according to its website.

Source: GAO interviews of State Department officials; State Department website. | GAO-25-107164

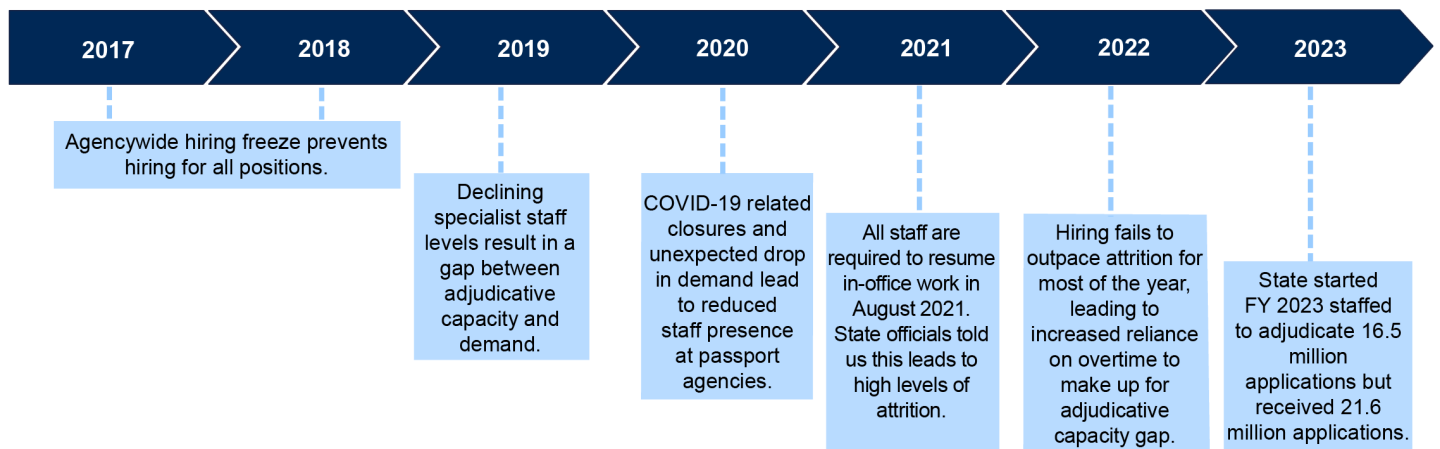
According to State officials, customers were frustrated by the lack of available appointments at passport agencies to apply for same-day or expedited passports.⁷ For example, officials told us that customers flew from across the country—from as far away as Maine—to the Honolulu passport agency because it was one of the few with available appointments. Honolulu passport agents said that at the height of the backlog, nearly half of appointment holders were from the continental U.S. One Honolulu official told us that during a 4- to 5-month period in 2023, customers arrived for passport appointments in Honolulu from the continental U.S. every day. According to State documents, in response to public demand as well as congressional concern, State drastically increased the number of in-person appointments in late spring 2023. For example, officials from the Miami Passport Agency told us that their office increased the number of appointments from 75 to 150 appointments a day.

⁷Applicants who must travel within 14 days or for life-or-death emergencies can, if they have not yet submitted an application, make an appointment through the online passport appointment system or, if they have submitted an application, call the National Passport Information Center. A report that we expect to issue in spring 2025 will provide more information about the National Passport Information Center.

Staffing Shortages and Other Factors Before and During Pandemic Contributed to Processing Delays in Fiscal Year 2023

Staffing shortages and other factors, including some that were present before the pandemic, led to and exacerbated delays in passport processing times during fiscal year 2023, according to State officials. In fiscal years 2017 through 2018, staffing shortages resulted from a hiring freeze that began in fiscal year 2017, according to State documentation. Although Passport Services initially maintained its service commitment time frames during this period, staffing shortages required specialists to work high amounts of overtime to compensate for resource constraints, according to documentation. In fiscal year 2020—the pandemic’s first year—demand for passports dropped before rising in fiscal years 2021 and 2022, when attrition among passport specialists also increased. In fiscal year 2023, high attrition and other factors contributed to the delays in passport processing. Figure 4 shows staffing-related events that contributed to the delays, according to State officials.

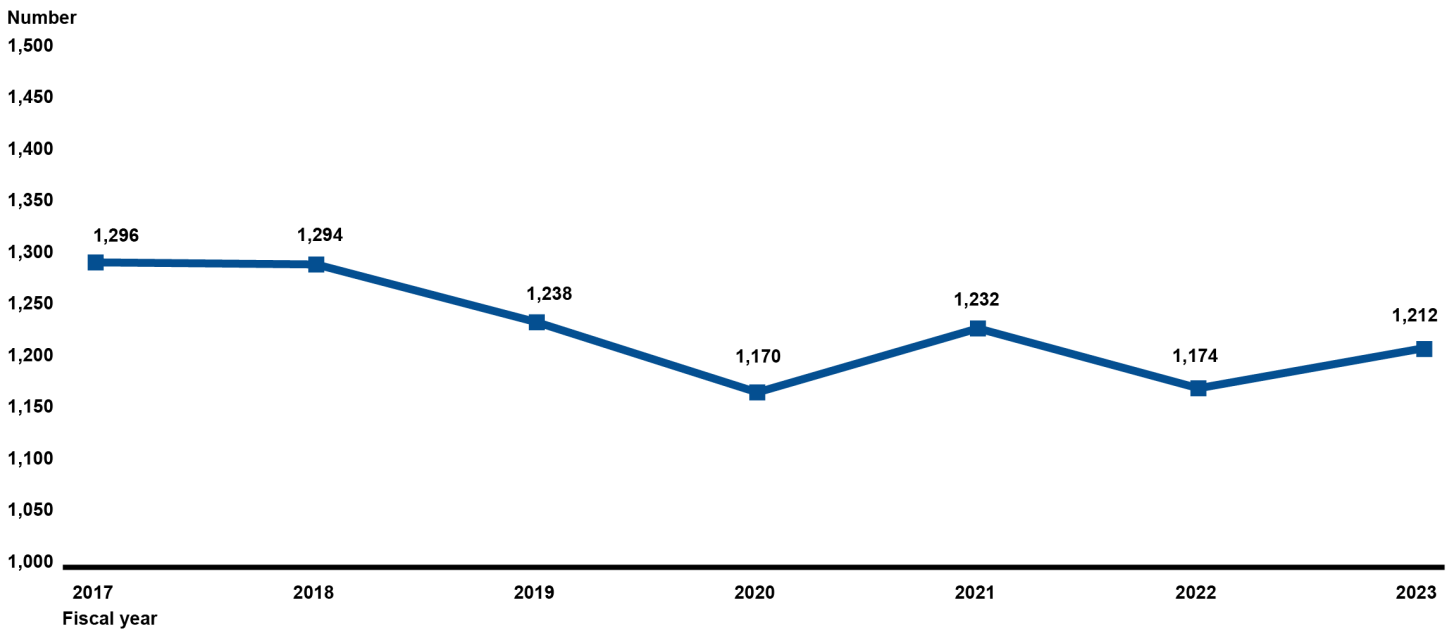
Figure 4: Timeline of Staffing-Related Events That State Officials Said Contributed to Passport Processing Delays, Fiscal Years 2017–2023



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data and interviews. | GAO-25-107164

As figure 5 shows, the number of passport specialists generally decreased from fiscal year 2017 to fiscal year 2023.

Figure 5: Number of Passport Specialists, Fiscal Years 2017–2023



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

Note: The data shown are the number of passport specialists employed by State nationwide during the first pay period of each fiscal year.

Fiscal Years 2017–2019: Hiring Freeze Limited Staffing, Yet Processing Times Generally Stayed Within Published Time Frames

In fiscal years 2017 through 2019, a hiring freeze as well as an influx of passport applications put State at risk of exceeding its service commitment time frames for passport processing, although Passport Services generally completed passport processing within its service commitment time frames.⁸ The hiring freeze, which began in 2017 and ended in 2018, prevented Passport Services from hiring and training the needed number of passport specialists. In addition, Passport Services experienced a surge of passport applications, which officials attributed in

⁸According to State data, in fiscal years 2017 and 2018, State’s average service commitment time frames for routine and expedited applications were 4 to 6 weeks and 2 to 3 weeks, respectively. In the last 5 months of fiscal year 2019, State changed the time frame for routine applications to 6 to 8 weeks; the time frame for expedited applications remained 2 to 3 weeks.

part to renewals of passports issued in 2007 in response to the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative.⁹

Yet our review of State data found that, even with the applications surge in fiscal year 2017, Passport Services consistently completed processing within its service commitment time frames. To maintain low processing times, specialists in some cases logged large amounts of adjudicative overtime, totaling approximately 163,000 hours during 8 consecutive months in fiscal year 2017, according to a January 2018 State memo.

After the hiring freeze was lifted in May 2018, State was unable to hire passport specialists at the rate necessary to meet staffing needs because attrition outpaced onboarding of new staff, according to a March 2019 State memo. From fiscal year 2018 through fiscal year 2019, the number of adjudicative staff decreased by 4.3 percent, from 1,294 to 1,238. This number dropped further during fiscal year 2019, declining by an additional 5.5 percent, from 1,238 to 1,170 by the start of fiscal year 2020. As a result, staffing at passport agencies in fiscal year 2019 was insufficient to complete routine passport processing, adjudication, and issuance within expected time frames, according to officials.

In fiscal year 2019, to compensate for the loss of adjudicative capacity and with the goal of maintaining low processing times, specialists again logged large amounts of overtime—9.1 percent more than in 2018, according to a January 2020 State memo. State also took steps to enhance production, such as opening additional offices for adjudication. However, State data show that processing times for up to 10 percent of applications were at risk of exceeding State's service commitment time frames during the last 4 months of fiscal year 2019. Because of the high numbers of applications pending adjudication, State increased the 4-to-6-week time frame for routine passport applications to 6 to 8 weeks for the last 5 months of the fiscal year to help set appropriate customer expectations.

⁹State and the Department of Homeland Security established the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative in 2009 to implement a recommendation by the 9/11 Commission and a requirement of the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 (Pub. L. No. 108-458, 118 Stat. 3638 (2004)). The initiative specifies acceptable documents and document requirements at 326 air, land, and sea ports of entry. It requires all citizens of the U.S. and nonimmigrant citizens of Canada, Mexico, and Bermuda to have a passport or other accepted travel document that establishes the bearer's identity and citizenship to enter or reenter the U.S. at all ports of entry when traveling from within the Western Hemisphere.

**Fiscal Years 2020–2022:
Demand for Passports
Dropped with Pandemic’s
Onset, Then Began to
Rise While Staffing
Fluctuated**

Demand for passports dropped precipitously in fiscal year 2020 before beginning to rise in fiscal years 2021 and 2022, and the number of passport specialists fluctuated. According to State documents, State received 11.5 million passport applications in fiscal year 2020—the smallest number since fiscal year 2005 and 33 percent fewer than it had forecast. State officials attributed this drop in applications to the COVID-19 pandemic’s onset and the associated travel restrictions.

State officials told us that, although hiring continued throughout the pandemic, they reduced staff’s physical presence at passport agencies for health and safety reasons and suspended service commitment time frames in March 2020.¹⁰ In summer 2020, staff who had been on leave for health and safety reasons began returning to the office. Officials told us that onboarding of new employees also resumed in summer 2020, leading to an increase in specialists by the beginning of fiscal year 2021.

However, the overall number of passport specialists declined during fiscal year 2021, in part because of a mandate to return to in-office work, according to State officials. At the beginning of fiscal year 2021, State had 1,232 passport specialists, but by the beginning of fiscal year 2022, that number had decreased to 1,174. According to officials, attrition increased in fiscal year 2021 and early fiscal year 2022 as staff members who did not want to return to in-office work—particularly those with more experience—found other jobs or retired while the pandemic was ongoing. State received 14.3 million passport applications in fiscal year 2021—24 percent more than in fiscal year 2020—which contributed to delays in processing.

For most of fiscal year 2022, attrition outpaced hiring of passport specialists, according to officials. However, in late fiscal year 2022, due to increased availability of funding, Passport Services implemented a hiring surge to expedite hiring, clearance, and onboarding of new staff, according to officials. Officials said that this resulted in a net increase of

¹⁰State officials told us that a significant number of passport specialists with pre-existing health conditions were on weather and safety leave in 2020 and 2021. These staff remained employed by Passport Services, but because the passport adjudication process is paper based, they were unable to process applications at home during the pandemic and thus could not help with the adjudicative workload. Officials told us that the weather and safety leave ended in September 2021.

passport specialists, from 1,174 at the start of fiscal year 2022 to 1,212 specialists by the beginning of fiscal year 2023.¹¹

During fiscal year 2022, State received 6.9 million expedited applications, which made up nearly 40 percent of the applications received. In contrast, in fiscal years 2014 through 2019, State had received an annual average of 3.8 million expedited applications. According to officials, this increase in expedited applications strained staffing resources and reduced overall capacity by requiring Passport Services to reallocate passport specialists to process the expedited applications. State officials told us that as a result, Passport Services was unable to clear the applications backlog during its typically slow season, September to November, as fiscal year 2023 began.

Fiscal Year 2023: Several Factors Compounded to Delay Passport Processing

Several factors—an unexpectedly large volume of applications, continued high rates of attrition, challenges related to technology, and applicant actions—compounded to delay passport processing in fiscal year 2023.

Volume of Applications

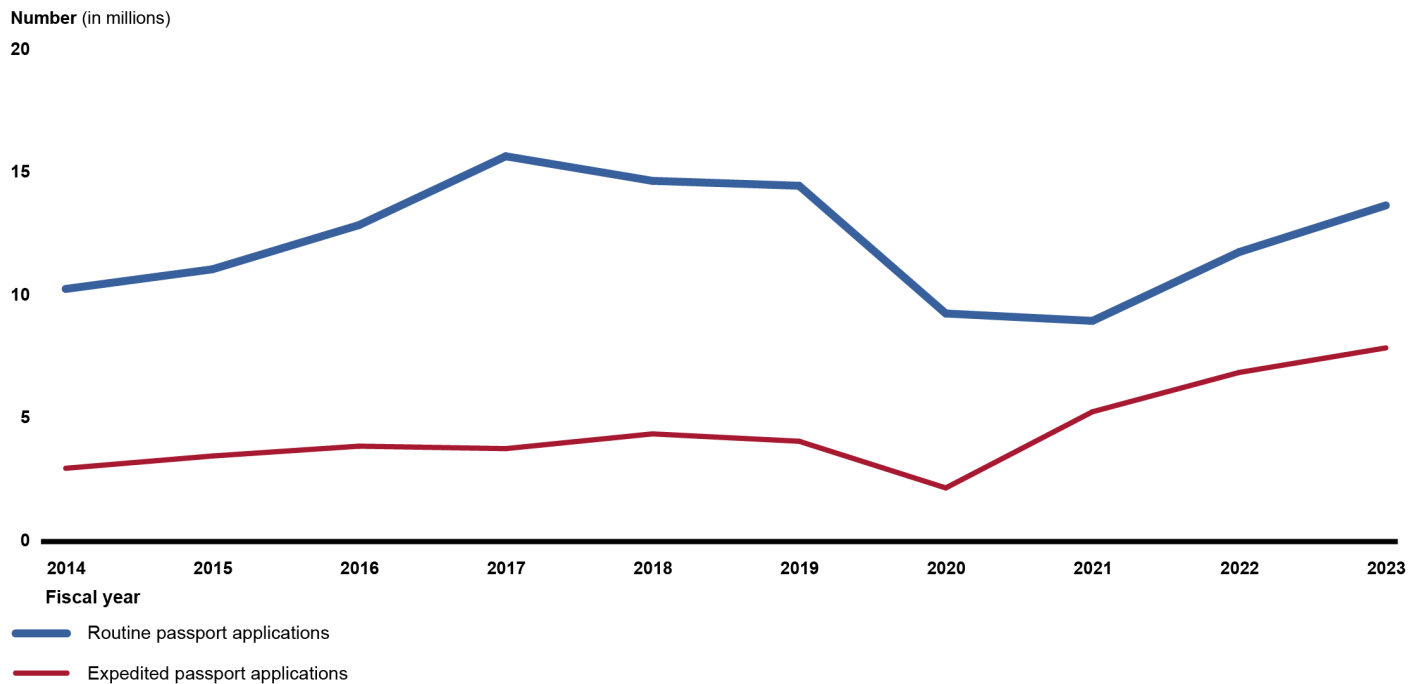
In fiscal year 2023, State received nearly 2 million more passport applications than expected, after beginning the year with more than a million pending applications. According to officials, at the start of fiscal year 2023, State expected to receive 19.9 million applications. By the end of the year, according to State data, it had received 21.6 million applications. Officials we spoke with attributed this influx to pent-up demand from fiscal year 2020, when State had anticipated millions more applications than it received. State also received a larger proportion of expedited applications in fiscal year 2023 than it was able to process. According to State data, expedited applications made up 22 percent of the total passport application workload before the pandemic and 37 percent of the workload in 2023.

The volume of expedited applications exceeded passport agencies' processing capacity and caused widespread backlogs across the nation, according to the October 2023 memo. Officials told us that the higher volume of expedited applications increased pressure on passport agencies and contributed to processing times that exceeded the service commitment time frames. Figure 6 shows the volume of routine and

¹¹State officials told us that although this hiring effort resulted in an increased number of specialists, staffing remained far below the level needed to handle the expected workload in fiscal year 2023.

expedited applications that State received in fiscal years 2014 through 2023.

Figure 6: Volume of Routine and Expedited Passport Applications, Fiscal Years 2014–2023



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

In addition, State began fiscal year 2023 with 1.3 million applications pending adjudication—five times the number pending adjudication at the start of fiscal year 2019, according to State data. Moreover, officials said that, due to the high volume of applications, storage limitations sometimes affected State’s distribution of the processing workload among passport agencies in fiscal year 2023. Officials said that in some cases, they had to distribute work on the basis of storage space rather than adjudicative capacity, which led to imbalances in processing times and to backlogs at locations with more storage space.

Officials at the National Passport Center, in Portsmouth, NH, said that during the height of the backlog in fiscal year 2023, they had to contact the local fire marshal to ensure that the office was meeting fire safety regulations and that the floor was not at risk of collapsing from the weight

of the boxes of pending work. Figure 7 shows boxes of applications stored at the National Passport Center in fiscal year 2023.

Figure 7: Passport Applications Stored at National Passport Center, Portsmouth, NH, Fiscal Year 2023



Source: Department of State (photos). | GAO-25-107164

High Attrition

In fiscal year 2023, average attrition among passport specialists exceeded 20 percent—its highest level in nearly 10 years—and negatively affected adjudication time frames, according to State officials. As in fiscal year 2021, much of this attrition occurred among staff at the GS-11 level, who often have more experience and can thus process more applications per day than newer staff, officials told us. According to the October 2023 State memo, the number of GS-4, GS-5, and GS-7 specialists showed a net increase of 148 from the prior fiscal year, but the number of GS-11 specialists showed a net decrease of 77.

According to a March 2019 State memo, approximately 16 months may elapse before a newly hired specialist becomes fully productive, resulting in a short-term drain on resources. In addition, officials told us that newer staff are required to have a certain percentage of their work audited and reviewed by supervisory specialists, which can limit the productivity of both subordinate and supervisory staff. Officials said that the remaining more experienced staff consequently had to divide their time and resources between adjudicating applications, training and supervising new staff, and auditing new-staff output.

Technology Challenges

State officials told us that several technology-related challenges—specifically, challenges related to the pilot of the Online Passport Renewal system (OPR) and to database outages—substantially slowed passport issuance in fiscal year 2023.

State Officials Reported High Applications Volume, High Pressure, and High Stress

State passport agency staff and managers recounted working intensely to meet production goals while also facing a record-breaking volume of work, insufficient adjudicative staff, and other challenges. Officials said that constantly having to work overtime—in addition to being surrounded by boxes of applications, stacked in hallways and breakrooms—caused extreme levels of stress. Officials said they worked holidays and weekends and felt unable to take any days off.

Although State managers told us that passport agency staff demonstrated a strong dedication to their mission to help U.S. citizens meet their travel goals, some expressed frustration over technological challenges, such as system outages, that inhibited progress and damaged morale.

State officials also told us that despite aggressive hiring efforts in 2023, they frequently encountered difficulties when onboarding new hires. For example, officials said that delays in the processing of pay and benefits for some new hires led to additional administrative duties for managerial and supervisory staff.

State officials told us that to help address these challenges, management implemented incentives such as hiring bonuses for employees and performance awards.

Source: GAO analysis of interviews with Department of State officials. | GAO-25-107164

According to State officials, the OPR pilot was rolled out in December 2022 without adequate stress testing, leading to several challenges that compounded the already heavy workload. Officials said that management required that a certain percentage of staff be dedicated to OPR use. For example, according to an October 2023 memo, 30 to 44 percent of staff was dedicated to using OPR to adjudicate applications from early February to mid-April 2023, when the system was taken offline at the conclusion of the OPR pilot. However, adjudicating electronic applications in OPR was considerably less efficient than adjudicating paper applications, according to officials. For example, officials said that a specialist who could normally adjudicate an average of 200 applications per day could adjudicate only eight per day in OPR, due to difficulty in navigating the system as well as technological challenges.

Officials told us that when processing of applications in OPR was very slow, some specialists resorted to work-arounds such as printing the applications and adjudicating them on paper before scanning them back into the system. According to State documents, OPR's severe latency, in addition to printing problems, required thousands of staff hours to resolve, diverting specialists from their existing workload. However, as of October 2024, OPR was fully operational, according to State officials, and State employees told us that it was working well.

In addition, State officials told us that outages in other systems used in passport processing—for example, State's Namecheck system and Consular Consolidated Database and a Social Security Administration database—limited passport issuances and impeded operations.¹² Outages in the Consular Consolidated Database reduced access to records necessary for efficient adjudication, including passport records, visa records and other databases needed to verify identity and citizenship, according to State's October 2023 memo. The memo also noted that, for example, the National Passport Center experienced an 8 percent system downtime in March 2023, which State estimated to equal a productivity loss of 68,000 passport issuances.

¹²According to State officials, specialists use the Namecheck system to determine an applicant's entitlement to a U.S. passport. The system allows users to search for potential issues, such as active warrants, fraud concerns, and child abduction. Specialists use the Social Security Administration system to help establish an applicant's identity by verifying that the applicant's Social Security number matches records and that the applicant is not deceased.

In January 2025, State officials told us that no significant outages of, or other issues related to, these systems had recently affected passport operations. Further, officials said that Passport Services had implemented several measures to enhance the systems' reliability and efficiency, including system upgrades; more robust maintenance and monitoring of system performance; and active collaboration with external agencies, such as the Social Security Administration, to maintain data accuracy and availability.¹³

Applicant Actions

Concerns about delays in passport processing led some applicants to take actions that further slowed processing. According to State officials, some applicants sought to avoid processing delays by submitting their applications both through OPR and during in-person appointments. Officials told us that such actions diverted specialist resources, exacerbating the delays.

Other applicants, frustrated by delays, complained to their congressional representatives, prompting them to send congressional inquiries to State, according to State officials. State documented receiving 525,036 congressional inquiries in calendar year 2023, including 260,826 in the second quarter. In contrast, in 2017, 2018, and 2019, State received an average of 9,848 congressional inquiries each quarter, totaling 118,171 inquiries over the 3 years.¹⁴ Officials at the National Passport Center told us that during the peak of the processing delays, the center assigned a team of 50 staff to address congressional inquiries. Officials also said that at several points, more than 5,000 inquiries were pending. Specialists assigned to address the inquiries paused ongoing work in order to locate, prioritize, and expedite the passport applications in question, which lengthened delays in processing older applications, according to officials.

¹³Officials also told us that, in addition to taking action to address known issues in existing systems, Passport Services was working to modernize all database and integration components that support passport processing.

¹⁴According to State, data on congressional inquiries were reported on a monthly basis from 2017 to 2019. In 2020, the reports were no longer required, according to State documentation, and data on congressional inquiries are therefore unavailable for 2020 and 2021. State documentation shows that State instituted quarterly reporting of these data in January 2022, with reporting to begin in the second quarter.

State Took Various Short-Term Steps Throughout Fiscal Year 2023 to Mitigate Passport Processing Backlog

State implemented a variety of short-term measures to mitigate the processing backlog in fiscal year 2023, including requiring passport specialists to work thousands of overtime hours, implementing an “all-hands-on-deck” operating posture, and making process changes to increase efficiency. In December 2023, State reported that passport processing times had returned to pre-pandemic time frames.

Mandatory Overtime

State required passport specialists to work an average of 12 to 24 overtime hours per month throughout fiscal year 2023.¹⁵ State data show that approximately 1,200 specialists worked more than 250,000 hours of overtime during the fiscal year. State documentation and workload managers at passport agencies we visited emphasized that overtime was essential to handle the increased volume of applications and to mitigate delays.

Specialists and contractor staff told us during our site visits that headquarters directed them to work as many hours as needed to reach production goals. According to these staff, specialists regularly worked through weekends and holidays. In one location we visited, officials said that specialists worked an average of 24 hours of overtime per week in fiscal year 2023. According to officials, although the use of mandatory overtime was critical to mitigating processing delays, it was also a key contributor to the high attrition rate for passport specialists in fiscal year 2023.

All-Hands-on-Deck Posture

In January 2023, State adopted an all-hands-on-deck posture involving passport agency management and Bureau of Consular Affairs staff. Passport Services required passport agency supervisors and managers to adjudicate applications for a minimum of 8 hours per week. Passport Services also required Bureau of Consular Affairs staff at headquarters to contribute a minimum of 8 hours of adjudication or other support services per week. Officials estimated that this approach contributed to the adjudication of approximately 30,000 passport applications per month in fiscal year 2023.

¹⁵The use of mandatory overtime lasted from February 2022 through November 2023.

Officials at the passport agencies we visited said that all levels of management, including agency directors, worked to process the high volume of applications in fiscal year 2023. For example, management staff batched applications as they arrived, conducted data entry, adjudicated applications, and mailed completed passports. Although this helped mitigate processing delays, managers and supervisors consequently had less time to complete their managerial tasks, according to officials.

In addition, CGI, the company that provides contractor staff to passport agencies, sent “tiger teams” to help with processing backlogs.¹⁶ These traveling teams provided operations support that included organizing and processing incoming applications, entering data, and providing counter and customer service support. According to State officials, the teams helped reduce the backlog of applications that had been sitting in boxes.

Finally, Passport Services directed other staff—such as Consular Affairs volunteers, Foreign Service officers, and retired annuitants, among others—to adjudicate applications at the Washington, DC, passport agency. According to officials, these staff contributed to processing about 333,000 of the approximately 716,000 applications the agency received in fiscal year 2023.

Process Changes to Increase Efficiency

Passport Services instituted several process changes in fiscal year 2023 to help mitigate passport processing delays. For example, State allowed experienced specialists greater discretion when assessing passport applications against State’s Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM) requirements, according to passport agency officials. For example, the FAM requires that applicants submit photos that are no more than 6 months old. Officials at the agencies said that because of the backlog, a photo was sometimes too old by the time they reviewed the application, which usually resulted in their putting the application on hold until the applicant submitted a new photo. Officials at the agencies said that in 2023, management gave experienced specialists the discretion to determine whether photos more than 6 months old could still be used.

In addition, State officials told us that they allowed specialists to use discretion about the number of notations required on passport

¹⁶Contractors at passport agencies are responsible for processing incoming and outgoing mail, printing and producing passport books and travel cards, and handling customer service phone calls. The adjudication process itself is inherently governmental and must be carried out by State employees.

documentation. The officials said that before this change, the FAM required specialists to manually annotate applications as they reviewed each verifying document—a time-consuming process, according to the officials.

Also, Passport Services initiated the use of keyboard shortcuts to expedite repetitive adjudication tasks by automatically checking across the databases that specialists use to verify citizenship documentation. According to State documentation, these shortcuts could significantly reduce the time it takes a specialist to run checks in these databases. If applied across the passport network, this time savings was expected to free up hundreds of adjudication hours per day, according to State documentation.

Moreover, State began using contractor staff at acceptance counters at some locations, according to passport agency officials, who characterized this process change as critical. Officials said that passport specialists previously were required to work at the counters in passport agencies, accepting applications and assisting customers. According to the officials, because of the increased number of in-person appointments in fiscal year 2023, passport agencies started using contractor staff to conduct these appointments, allowing specialists to concentrate on adjudicating passports.

State's Long-Term Plans to Avoid Future Processing Delays Do Not Identify Interim Milestones or Resource Needs

State Is Developing Long-Term Plans to Avoid Future Delays

State is developing long-term plans to reduce the likelihood of future processing delays. The Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Passport Services told us that senior and regional managers for Passport Services met in January 2024 to discuss the future of passport processing. The result of this meeting was the Transformation Roadmap, which lays out long-term plans to increase efficiencies and avoid future processing delays and defines a strategic goal of reducing processing times. The roadmap also defines goals for Passport Services to be the best

customer service provider and the best place to work in the U.S. government.

According to officials, the roadmap is intended as a mechanism to achieve Passport Services' long-term strategic goal of having a completely electronic process, which is not possible with current processes and technology. Officials said that a central concept of the planned transformation is the introduction of efficiencies and improvement of processes to prepare Passport Services' staff and technology to "seamlessly withstand" any future unexpected workload surge.

According to State officials, the Transformation Roadmap identified, as of November 2024, eight workstreams with more than 83 related ongoing projects, widely varying in difficulty and complexity. The following are examples of the roadmap projects:

- Improving the information technology used in passport processing, including developing a live web chat for customer service providers and a system for submitting application documentation online or through a mobile device
- Expanding Passport Services' annual employee awards program to include awards for innovation
- Opening six new passport agencies, in Charlotte, NC; Cincinnati, OH; Kansas City, MO; Orlando, FL; Salt Lake City, UT; and San Antonio, TX
- Developing a strategy and proofs of concept for introducing a "digital passport"—that is, a digital method of identity verification that U.S. citizens can use as a companion to their passport books

According to Passport Services officials, as of November 2024 the roadmap remained under development and the number of projects continued to grow. Officials said that they remained willing to add, alter, or remove projects as necessary to best support the goals of the roadmap.

State's Transformation Roadmap Does Not Define Milestones for All Projects

Although State's Transformation Roadmap lays out milestones for selected projects, it does not include milestones to help ensure the successful implementation of all roadmap projects. Passport Services officials told us that they track progress in implementing each workstream and can also track the overall progress of Transformation Roadmap projects. In July 2024, officials told us that data analysts and business process experts were developing qualitative and quantitative metrics to measure the projects' success. In October 2024, officials said that the first

five workstreams of the roadmap were 27 percent complete and that planning for the other three workstreams was underway. According to officials, the target completion date for the roadmap is 2030.

However, Passport Services has defined milestones for implementing fewer than a third of the Transformation Roadmap projects. In December 2024, officials provided a briefing document that identifies 24 of the 83 current projects as constituting a “critical path” to ensuring the success of the roadmap. Officials told us that these 24 projects will improve technology, establish and staff the six new planned passport agencies, and update performance requirements for Passport Services staff. According to the document, the critical path includes milestones, as well as a sequence and project completion dates, with completion of all 24 projects expected by the end of fiscal year 2027. Officials said that milestones for the remaining 59 roadmap projects remained under development. As a result, Passport Services has not identified the progress that it intends to make on these projects by key points in time—information that would help it determine whether the effort as a whole is proceeding as planned and on schedule.

Selected leading practices for effective agency reform that we have identified in prior work call for agencies to develop implementation plans with key milestones, including deliverables to track progress in reform efforts.¹⁷ Our prior work states that full implementation of major transformations can span several years and must be carefully and closely managed. Without milestones for implementing all projects in the roadmap, State will not be well positioned to determine whether its efforts to reduce the likelihood of future delays in passport processing are on track and to make course corrections if these efforts lag.

State Has Nearly Met Staffing Goals for Passport Services but Has Not Determined All Resources Needed for Transformation Roadmap

State has nearly met staffing targets for passport specialists, but it has not identified the resources needed to fully implement its Transformation Roadmap projects. State officials told us in July 2024 that the biggest risks to successful implementation of roadmap efforts were insufficient staffing and funding. The officials stated that insufficient staffing would undercut their ability to implement the roadmap projects. Specifically, if passport demand continued to rise while the number of passport specialists fell, managers and headquarters staff would once again be

¹⁷GAO, *Government Reorganization: Key Questions to Assess Agency Reform Efforts*, [GAO-18-427](#) (Washington, DC: June 2018).

directed to do adjudication work. According to officials, this would prevent managers and headquarters staff from working on roadmap efforts.

In January 2024, State officials told us that Passport Services' goal was to have 1,600 passport specialists. To meet this goal, State received direct hiring authority for passport specialist positions from the Office of Personnel Management in November 2023. Using this authority, State can select from a wider pool of candidates more efficiently than its normal hiring authority allowed. According to officials, direct hiring authority enables State to hire passport specialists at a rate needed to outpace attrition. As of July 2024, Passport Services had 1,540 specialists.

According to the Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Passport Services, State's larger challenge to implementing the projects in the roadmap will be establishing long-term, sustainable funding sources. The Bureau of Consular Affairs is funded entirely by the consular fees it collects for passport and visa services. As we have previously reported, individual statutes specify how State can use revenue from each of these fees.¹⁸ These statutes authorize State to use certain fees to cover the costs of any consular service and to use other fees only for specific services or activities, according to State documentation.

According to State, since the start of the pandemic, Congress has expanded and extended State's expenditure authorities, allowing State to use consular fee revenue and to carry over balances from prior fiscal years in ways it previously could not. Officials stated that Passport Services needs continued access to those funds to complete its modernization and transformation efforts. According to State officials, the Bureau of Consular Affairs has informed Congress and the Office of Management and Budget that these authorities play a critical role in Passport Services' transformation efforts. The officials said they have not precisely determined the resources needed to complete the transformation efforts, because it would be difficult to disaggregate the additional funding needed for these efforts from what the annual Consular Affairs budget will already support.

However, developing reliable cost estimates is crucial for realistic program planning, budgeting, and management, according to a guide that

¹⁸GAO, *Consular Affairs: State May be Unable to Cover Projected Costs if Revenues Do Not Quickly Rebound to Pre-Pandemic Levels*, [GAO-22-104424](#) (Washington, DC: Apr. 18, 2022).

we previously developed for estimating agency program costs.¹⁹ The guide states that although cost estimating is challenging, completing an estimate with the best available information, while also documenting the estimate's shortcomings, is both proper and prudent. Realistic estimates of requirements allow for effective resource allocation and increase the probability of a program's success; they also help program offices justify budgets to Congress and the Office of Management and Budget, among others. Until Passport Services determines the resources required to fully implement its Transformation Roadmap efforts to reduce the likelihood of future delays in passport processing, its ability to advocate for continued access to these resources will be limited.

Conclusions

State's timeliness in adjudicating passport applications and issuing passports—a critical federal service—directly affects American citizens and the travel and leisure industry. The unprecedented numbers of applications for passport issuance or renewal in fiscal year 2023 brought into focus challenges that Passport Services plans to address with its Transformation Roadmap. However, although Passport Services has established a broad time frame for implementing the roadmap, it has not defined milestones to track the progress of all 83 projects outlined in the roadmap. Establishing milestones for all projects in the roadmap would better position Passport Services to determine whether these efforts to modernize passport operations and reduce the likelihood of future processing delays are on track and whether course corrections are needed.

Further, although officials have cited inadequate resources as the greatest risk to the success of Passport Services' long-term plans to shorten the time frame for passport processing, they have not determined the resources needed to complete them. Determining the resources required to fully implement the Transformation Roadmap would strengthen Passport Services' ability to advocate for continued funding needed to reduce the likelihood of future delays in passport processing.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following two recommendations to State:

The Secretary of State should ensure that the Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs defines milestones for all Transformation Roadmap

¹⁹GAO, *Cost Estimating and Assessment Guide: Best Practices for Developing and Managing Program Costs*, [GAO-20-195G](#) (Washington, DC: March 2020).

projects to enable the tracking of progress in implementation.
(Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of State should ensure that the Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs determines the resources needed to implement the Transformation Roadmap. (Recommendation 2)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Department of State for review and comment. In its formal comments, reproduced in appendix I, State concurred with our recommendations and provided an update on the number of roadmap projects active, completed, and closed as incomplete. In addition, State identified some of the staff it will need for certain Transformation Roadmap efforts and said that additional resources will be needed for others. State also noted that the Secretary of State is committed to ensuring that Passport Services has the staff needed to both serve its customers within service commitments and modernize its operations.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees and the Secretary of State. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact Tatiana Winger at (202) 512-4128 or wingert@gao.gov. Contact points for our Office of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix II.

//SIGNED//

Tatiana Winger
Acting Director, International Affairs and Trade

List of Addressees

The Honorable Lindsey Graham
Chair

The Honorable Brian Schatz
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate

The Honorable Mario Diaz-Balart
Chairman

The Honorable Lois Frankel
Ranking Member
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The Honorable Adam B. Schiff
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The Honorable Ed Case
House of Representatives

The Honorable Brian Fitzpatrick
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The Honorable Donald Norcross
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The Honorable Eleanor Holmes Norton
House of Representatives

The Honorable John H. Rutherford
House of Representatives

The Honorable Dina Titus
House of Representatives

The Honorable Nikema Williams
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Comments from the Department of State



United States Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

MAR 11 2025

Kimberly Gianopoulos
Managing Director
International Affairs and Trade
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

Dear Ms. Gianopoulos:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "PASSPORT PROCESSING: State Department Should Identify Milestones and Resource Needs for Its Plans to Avoid Future Delays." GAO Job Code 107164.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. D. Johnson", written over a printed name.

Jeffrey D. Johnson
Acting Deputy Comptroller for Financial,
Audit, and Technology Management
Bureau of Comptroller & Global Financial
Services

Enclosure:
As stated

cc: GAO – Tatiana Winger (Acting)
OIG - Norman Brown

Department of State comments to GAO Report

PASSPORT PROCESSING: State Department Should Identify Milestones and Resource Needs for Its Plans to Avoid Future Delays
(GAO-25-107164, GAO Code 107164)

The Department of State appreciates the opportunity to comment on GAO's draft report *"Passport Processing: State Department Should Identify Milestones and Resource Needs for Its Plans to Avoid Future Delays."*

Recommendation 1: The Secretary of State should ensure that the Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs defines milestones for all Transformation Roadmap projects to enable the tracking of progress in implementation.

Department Response: The Department of State agrees with the recommendation. The Passport Services (PPT) Transformation continues to progress successfully. As of 2/13/2025, the Transformation is comprised of nine workstreams and 63 active projects. To date, 13 projects have been accepted, and seven projects have been closed incomplete because project work yielded outcomes that did not support our mission's objectives for the future of passports.

Recommendation 2: The Secretary of State should ensure that the Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs determines the resources needed to implement the Transformation Roadmap.

Department Response: The Department of State agrees with the recommendation. PPT's Transformation includes ambitious changes to our current business model, staffing, and technology. For example, to ensure PPT meets the growing demand for passports and reduces service delivery timelines, goals of our Transformation, we plan to open six new agencies, subject to availability of funding. CA will need to recruit and onboard over 200 new direct-hire employees and 210 contractors to staff and support the new agencies and current passport operations.

In addition, we aspire to create an end-to-end electronic application for all passport applications. To do this, CA will require additional resources to staff passport product development teams and manage interdependent technical initiatives.

Secretary Rubio has approved a hiring freeze exemption to ensure that PPT has the staff needed to continue to serve our customers within our service commitments and modernize at the same time.

Appendix II: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Tatiana Winger at (202) 512-4128 or wingert@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contacts named above, Joyee Dasgupta (Assistant Director), Julia Jebo Grant (Analyst-in-Charge), Jina Yu (Senior Analyst), Cindy Do, Reid Lowe, Bahar Etemadian, Gina Hoover, Mark Dowling, and Scott Borre made key contributions to this report.

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