

Timely, Efficient Solutions Will Ease Passport Debacle

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Anyone who has traveled to another country knows there is much preparation involved: planning flights, reserving hotel rooms and -- most important of all - making sure a valid passport is secured. Imagine taking all these steps only to be informed by the passport office on the eve of departure that the passport application you submitted months ago is still pending.

Three million Americans are now facing cancellations or delays of their best-laid and paid-for travel plans because the U.S. State Department has failed to process the passport documents. Despite agency employees literally working around the clock, up to a half-million passport applications have been pending for three months or more.

A sharp increase in demand for passports was inevitable two years ago when the Bush administration announced that beginning Jan. 23, 2007, Americans traveling to Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean would be required to carry passports. The Government Accountability Office raised concerns last year about passport-processing capacity, and the administration responded by assuring Congress they would be ready. But when millions of Americans dutifully began applying for passports, they experienced a harsh reality. Because the administration vastly underestimated the number of applications it would receive, the State Department has neither the staff nor the systems in place to process applications in a timely fashion.

It's a crisis headed for a meltdown.

Not surprisingly, because California has a large concentration of naturalized U.S. citizens, it's been one of the hardest hit. At the San Francisco Passport Agency, applications made in March are piled floor to ceiling in the agency's lunch room. Front-line employees at the agency have made a valiant effort to catch up, but neither they nor my constituents should ever have been placed in this untenable situation.

During the past two weeks, the administration has taken temporary steps to ease the burden on travelers. The air travel rule has been relaxed, allowing Americans to fly to other North American countries with a government-issued photo I.D. and proof (obtained through the State Department's Web site) that they have a passport application pending. This is little consolation to those applicants without access to a computer and a printer.

The administration also announced a six-month delay in requiring passports for land and sea travel, a rule that was scheduled to take effect Jan. 1, 2008. Given the administration's performance so far, Congress is moving to extend the deadline even further. On June 15, I voted for, and the House approved, legislation to delay the land-and-sea passport requirement until 2009. The Senate is considering similar legislation.

The question now is: Will the administration actually learn from its mistake?

This week I organized a bipartisan effort of 46 members of the California congressional delegation to urge Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to do everything in her power to deal with the crisis and come up with a systematic plan to meet the rapidly growing demand for passports. (The department issued 12 million passports in 2006 and is expecting 26 million applications in 2008.)

What are the solutions? First, we need more passport-processing centers across the country. The State Department has to move rapidly to implement better ways for passport applications to be submitted in a timely and efficient way. Since we're now in the 21st century, an online renewal application process for "qualified travelers" (similar to the one used in California to renew licenses of "qualified drivers") would vastly improve and provide better service to travelers, without sacrificing security or accuracy.

A detailed audit needs to be performed to review the employee-hiring process, and a timeline established on security checks to ensure that they're streamlined to meet the needs of the agency.

Americans shouldn't be penalized for following the rules, only to be subjected to standing in line with 500 others in a desperate attempt to salvage their vacation plans. The sooner the administration acts, the faster we'll all be able to reach our destinations.

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