

JAMES LANKFORD
OKLAHOMA

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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC OFFICE:
316 HART SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20510
(202) 224-5754

OKLAHOMA CITY OFFICE:
1015 NORTH BROADWAY AVENUE, SUITE 310
OKLAHOMA CITY, OK 73102
(405) 231-4941

TULSA OFFICE:
401 SOUTH BOSTON AVENUE, SUITE 2150
TULSA, OK 74103
(918) 581-7651

July 19, 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Secretary Blinken,

I write to express concern about the Department of State's current policies pertaining to the processing of passport applications. This is a vitally important function of the federal government that directly affects the lives, plans, and finances of millions of Americans. The current approach is slow, outdated, inefficient, and inadequate to meet constituent needs in a timely manner, so your leadership is needed to implement changes as soon as possible.

On March 18, 2020, the Department of State suspended normal operations in the Bureau of Consular Affairs due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which included a pause in passport processing. This policy led to massive delays for my constituents and ultimately produced a backlog of 1.7 million applications in June 2020. In response to this problem, I recommended a variety of changes to Secretary Pompeo, many of which were implemented.¹² In addition to these recommendations, Passport Services employees were designated as "Mission Critical" which allowed them to return to work at an accelerated pace under the Diplomacy Strong framework. These positive changes led to a gradual decrease in the size of the backlog and a restoration of processing times to normal levels by fall of 2020.

Unfortunately, this is clearly no longer the case. The current processing time for a routine passport or passport renewal application is 18-24 weeks – nearly four times longer than the typical processing time of 4-6 weeks in the fall of 2020. I have heard from an unusually large number of constituents whose vacations, work trips, and honeymoons were cancelled due to these delays and did not receive adequate assistance from the Department of State, which is totally unacceptable. I urge you to make changes to ensure the State Department is not partially responsible for stifling international commerce at a time when our nation is eager and able to resume travel, and to ensure the Bureau of Consular Affairs is fulfilling its responsibilities to the American people.

In addition to these concerning delays, it has come to my attention that the current backlog of pending passport applications is 2.2 million – far higher than the 1.7 million figure last June and more than double the number of pending applications last fall. Since I worked closely with the previous Administration to remedy this same problem last summer, I am disappointed to learn that

¹ [Letter to Secretary Pompeo | 3 June 2020](#)

² [Letter to Secretary Pompeo | 2 July 2020](#)

the Department's progress has backslid to such a stark extent. Additionally, the Department has discontinued the practice of publishing the size of the backlog on the State Department website, which the previous Administration did regularly through the end of September 2020.³

From my observation, there are several compounding problems with the current passport policies that are producing these massive delays. First, the processing time in the "lockbox" stage is currently as long as six weeks. When a constituent applies for a passport or passport renewal, the file goes to the "lockbox" where it is securely processed and given a "locator number." Citibank is the contractor for this part of the process, which is also overseen by the Treasury Department and usually takes 24 hours, at which time the constituent can see their file's locator number online and monitor their application's progress. In a June 30 memo to Congressional staff, the Department stated, "Treasury-operated Citibank lockboxes ... have been experiencing operational issues. ... Service partner operational delays are currently up to six weeks after the passport was mailed."⁴

The delay from one day to six weeks in the lockbox phase of the process is entirely unacceptable. I ask that you provide a detailed explanation of the cause of these "operational issues" at the lockbox stage. Additionally, I urge you and the Secretary Yellen to pressure Citibank to present an actionable plan to accelerate its processing times to the typical turnaround of 24 hours as soon as possible. If Citibank and other partners are not fulfilling their obligations to the taxpayers in a satisfactory manner, I would support a search for alternative contractors for this phase of the process who can get the job done. Additionally, if the cause of these "operational issues" is outdated social distancing requirements or other COVID-related restrictions that are no longer required by local mandates or CDC guidance, the policy for these personnel must be updated to ensure maximum productivity.

Second, it is clear that the 26 regional passport agencies and centers are not operating at full capacity to meet constituent needs. Some of these centers are still in Phases 1 and 2 of re-opening, whereas others were upgraded to Phase 3 on July 12, which is the final phase of partial reopening before returning to normal operations. In my view, nearly all of these sites should be operating at full capacity at this juncture unless the local COVID restrictions in their city of operation explicitly prohibit it. Since re-opening under the Diplomacy Strong framework is intended to be "conditions-based," it seems clear that all of these facilities should be operating at a higher capacity than is presently happening. Upon entering office, President Biden's stated target date for a return to normalcy in the United States was July 4, 2021. With the worst of COVID-19 now behind us, these 26 centers should be serving the American people at full speed.

Third, my caseworkers estimate that the number of appointments at the regional passport agencies are less than 1/3 of what was available prior to COVID-19, which has made getting an appointment on short notice for individuals with imminent travel virtually impossible. Additionally, no passport centers nationwide have allowed walk-ins since March of 2020, when regular operations were suspended. I have even encountered instances where Americans have secured appointments at a passport agency by purchasing it on the secondary market from other constituents, which is potentially fraudulent behavior.⁵ Not only is this limited appointment capacity totally insufficient

³ [Letter from A/S Taylor | 22 June 2020](#)

⁴ [Service Partner Challenges](#)

⁵ [The Wall Street Journal | Passport Renewals Are Taking Months—Have You Checked Yours Lately?](#)

to meet the needs of the American people, but it is also compounding the number of pending applications in the system, which will ultimately hinder our ability to dig out of this hole. I urge you to scale up operations to meet demand by bringing the workforce back to 100% capacity, tripling the number of appointments, and allowing walk-ins at all of these locations.

Fourth, the Department has stopped sharing the number of pending passport applications with the public, which is a shift from the practice of the Trump Administration during the period of massive delays last spring and summer. Once passport operations were suspended in March 2020, the State Department released weekly updates citing the size of the backlog and updates on consular services. Through September 2020, the Frequently Asked Questions page on the Consular Affairs website included the size of the backlog, but this is no longer the case.⁶ I urge you to operate in transparency and resume the practice of sharing this information with American people and Members of Congress until this matter is resolved.

It is my desire to work constructively with you and the Department's workforce to address this issue in a timely and focused manner. Ultimately, what is needed in this situation is a comprehensive and ambitious strategy to hastily solve this problem. I urge you establish a strategic plan to quickly return to normal operations for passport processing services, as well as swiftly and securely processing the backlog of applications so that turnaround times are promptly restored to normal levels. It is not enough for the workforce to simply come back to work and resume processing the applications at a normal pace. The Department must make up for lost time so that these delays do not affect travel in the upcoming holiday season or into next year.

As such, please find below eight recommendations that would immediately improve the passport process if implemented. I ask that you incorporate these changes as soon as possible so that constituent needs are met, and so that the current delays do not affect the Department's operations in 2022 and beyond.

1. All 26 regional passport agencies and centers need to be re-opened to 100% capacity with the full workforce returning to the office for the full work week. I urge you to issue a directive to the heads of each regional passport center to bring their workforce back to 100% capacity within 14 days. If local COVID restrictions in a particular city forbid office buildings from returning to 100% capacity at this time, the Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources should engage with that site to develop a contextualized plan to scale up to the maximum capacity permitted in their local context.
2. Once all 26 regional passport agencies are at 100% capacity, I urge you to direct each center to significantly scale up the number of appointments available to the public. It is clear that the supply of appointments is insufficient to meet the demand, which is why I ask that you set an ambitious goal of tripling the number of appointments at each site as soon as possible. Bringing the workforce back to 100% capacity and tripling the number of appointments will have the positive effects of meeting demand, reducing the backlog, and restoring the public trust.
3. All 26 sites must resume allowing walk-ins at their facilities, which was permitted prior to the suspension of normal operations on March 18, 2020. This will reduce demand for appointments and provide an additional option for Americans submitting applications. It is

⁶ [Frequently Asked Questions](#)

clear that the prohibition on walk-ins is no longer consistent with the current CDC guidance for social distancing in public settings.

4. You and Secretary Yellen must increase pressure on Citibank to reduce turnaround times in the “lockbox” phase of the application process. The operational delays in this key initial phase of the process are exacerbating the problems in other stages down the line. We must address the problems at this stage by applying pressure and providing resources to Citibank to restore the turnaround time to 24 hours, which will also enable Americans to know their file’s locator number in a timely manner. Following the changes made by the previous Administration last June, the Department set an initial goal of assigning a tracking number to all applications in the backlog by June 17, 2020, and I urge you to establish a similarly ambitious goal in this instance.
5. The Department must prioritize urgent processing requests, such as expedited requests and Americans with imminent travel plans.
6. The Department should refund the fees for individuals who paid for expedited service and clearly did not receive it.
7. The Department must improve its communication with Congress and the public. I ask that you instruct the Congressional liaisons in the Consular Affairs bureau to respond to Congressional offices who send urgent requests within one business day, which unfortunately has not been the case in most instances as of late.
8. The Department should release the number of pending applications online and update the figure weekly so that Congress and the public are appraised of the Administration’s progress in reducing the size of this backlog.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter. I appreciate your consideration of these suggestions and look forward to working with you to remedy this problem.

In God We Trust,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James Lankford", written in a cursive style. The signature is positioned above a horizontal line.

James Lankford
United States Senator