

**STATE DEPARTMENT SERVICES FOR THE
AMERICAN PEOPLE: AN OVERVIEW OF
CONSULAR AFFAIRS AND PROGRAMS**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
UNITED STATES SENATE**

ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

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WEDNESDAY, JUNE 7, 2023

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:01 a.m., in room SD-419, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Robert Menendez presiding.

Present: Senators Menendez [presiding], Cardin, Murphy, Kaine, Merkley, Booker, Schatz, Van Hollen, Risch, Romney, Ricketts, and Hagerty.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. ROBERT MENENDEZ,
U.S. SENATOR FROM NEW JERSEY**

The CHAIRMAN. This Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing will come to order.

When Americans had to be evacuated around the world at the start of the COVID pandemic, Consular Affairs officers worked day and night to help them get home.

When grandparents who are nationals of another country want to visit their American grandchildren, Consular Affairs officers interview them at posts abroad and process their visa applications.

When American citizens like Brittney Griner are detained or arrested unjustly abroad, consular officers are often the first to visit them in prison, and when my constituents in New Jersey and those of every member of this committee need to renew their passports, Consular Affairs officers process their applications.

Assistant Secretary Bitter, while I know your team probably gets more angry phone calls than any other Foreign Service officer, I want to start by saying we do appreciate the work that you and all of those who work with you do, often under incredibly demanding circumstances.

For better or for worse, many Americans' only interaction with the State Department is getting or renewing a passport, leading to some of those frustrating phone calls.

I do not need to tell you that the current backlog has people waiting upwards of 3 months for their passports, not even including shipping time.

In March, Secretary Blinken said you were getting close to half a million passport applications a week, putting you on track to beat last year's records of processing almost 22 million passports.

Even so, my office has been inundated with calls from constituents concerned about receiving their passports before they travel. Last week, we had nearly 50 open cases helping constituents get their passports.

Whether it is a last-minute family emergency or their first international trip since COVID restrictions were lifted, Americans should not be experiencing such extended wait times, especially during the busy summer travel season.

I applaud Secretary Blinken's decision to establish a task force to speed up wait times. I know that the Department is hiring more staff and I know the staff you do have are working overtime.

We need to find out what else we can do to help you achieve the goal we all want. What are we doing to improve the online passport renewal initiative? I would also like to hear about your work processing visas.

Consular officers—affairs officers in embassies overseas are the sole people—sole people—responsible for conducting visa interviews. Very often, I am told by individuals, well, the ambassadors are—no, the consular officer has the final say on what visas are.

Not only are they often overloaded and work long hours, their work is sometimes literally life and death. Take the recent success story of Sima Barakzai, an Afghan woman whose son served as a combat interpreter helping U.S. special forces hunt down the Taliban.

Following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, she and her family were targeted by the new government. They left notices at her abandoned home and questioned her neighbors.

For 2 years, my office worked with Consular Affairs to help Sima and her family reach the United States as promised. Thankfully, just last week she finally touched down in San Francisco after a tumultuous departure from Pakistan.

There are many more stories, some heroic and some more mundane—airlifting someone for medical relief, getting a grandmother to her grandchild's baptism or bris, and some more practical, helping American businesses get their employees they need for success whether hiring for Morey's Piers in New Jersey or a data engineer assisting a new startup, making sure international students get visas to attend American universities in a timely manner.

Because in addition to the billions of dollars these students bring to our communities, they also enrich the fabric of our nation.

I know you have been under strain and I want to hear what, if any, additional resources or assistance you need to continue to provide these vital services.

We have to ensure that the United States remains the top destination for the world's smartest brains and hardest workers and we need to make sure we keep our nation's promises not only to those who served with our soldiers and our diplomatic officers, but to those wrongfully detained Americans who deserve regular consular access.

Putin's government has twice now refused consular access to Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich. That is simply unacceptable and, Assistant Secretary Bitter, I urge you and the State Department to keep pushing Moscow on this point.

I will just close. I often get calls on a Thursday that says, “I just looked at my passport and I need to travel to a wedding on Sunday,” and I say, “well, I am not Houdini.”

We try to help and your New York office, by the way, is incredibly, incredibly tremendous work effort that they have and very helpful, but we actually held a press conference, a workshop, *Look Before You Leave*, so that people look at their passports well before they are thinking of traveling and find out whether or not they are in need of a new passport because you need—not only does it have to be still valid, but it has to be valid for at least 6 months beyond. Most people do not know that and so we work all the time trying to make that case back at home.

I appreciate the work that you do. We just want to see how we make it all do better. A better sense of all the good the Consular Affairs does for the country is part of what I hope the hearing to be, but also to determine how we can do better.

With that, let me turn to the distinguished ranking member for his remarks.

**STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES E. RISCH,
U.S. SENATOR FROM IDAHO**

Senator RISCH. Thank you, Assistant Secretary Bitter, for being here today. Mr. Chairman, I get those calls too, but usually it is at 4 o'clock on Friday afternoon, not on Thursdays. Thursday is a luxury.

[Laughter.]

Senator RISCH. In any event, thank you for the important work you do and it is critically important for a vast swath of Americans who partake of these services.

At the request of the Department, when I was overseas I actually sat in on some of the interviews that the frontline people over there do when they are issuing visas and I was incredibly impressed with their ability and the efficiency and respect that they carry out their job and I really appreciate that.

Having said that, Americans have been struggling to get passports for years now and waiting weeks longer than they did before the pandemic, as the chairman has pointed out.

Foreigners have to wait months, sometimes years, to visit the United States. These delays directly hurt American industry, slow economic growth, and delay reuniting families.

This is especially true in my state of Idaho where major manufacturers like Micron Technology have trouble getting visas for workers who are desperately needed to stay ahead of their competition, or our farmers who have problems getting visas for seasonal ag workers and our world-class resorts have trouble attracting tourists who cannot get visas to vacation in Idaho, and as the chairman has referred to, and I am sure every member of this committee has dealt with, calls from constituents to help in that regard.

I understand there was a backlog that developed during COVID and the Department is still digging out, but let us be clear. The Department time and time again has failed to plan for the crisis and instead becomes a victim. This needs to change.

Given all of this, I was particularly frustrated when I watched the evacuation from Sudan, and Sudan was not the first problem I have had with State Department evacuations. I was, as a lot of people, were horrified by the catastrophic evacuation of Afghanistan.

Our evacuation in Kyiv also left much to be desired, particularly in terms of getting people back in when we opened up. If I sound a little frustrated, it is because I am.

A hearing like this should be about highlighting the great work that the State Department does to serve the American people. Every American gets their passport from the State Department.

Every American whose family member needed a visa to be reunited with a loved one must work with the State Department. Every American adopting a child internationally or, alternatively, who is fighting to bring a parentally abducted child back home must go through State.

The same office, the Office of Children's Issues, serves both of these purposes, but woefully continues to miss the mark in true service to Americans.

When Americans get in trouble abroad, it is the State Department that should be there to help and we often contact them to do so.

To be clear, there is much to celebrate in the Bureau of Consular Affairs and more broadly with our hardworking consular officers working across the world.

However, I am afraid the problems right now currently outweigh the successes and the cheerleading regarding the service must be tempered as we said here now by the reality on the ground today.

With that, again, thank you for being here. We are anxious to hear how you are going to fix all this. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The CHAIRMAN. Our witness today is Assistant Secretary Rena Bitter, who prior to assuming her role in August of 2021, was the dean of the Leadership and Management School at the Foreign Service Institute. In addition, she has served from 2016 to 2020 as the U.S. Ambassador to the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Her Washington experience includes tours in the executive secretariat, special assistant to Secretary of State Colin Powell, director of the State Department Operations Center.

She has served overseas as counsel general in Ho Chi Minh City, consulate chief in Amman, Jordan and nonimmigrant visa chief in London, as well as tours in Bogota and Mexico City. She is a career Senior Foreign Service officer and joined the State Department in 1994.

We thank you for your service. We thank you for appearing here today. Your full statement will be included in the record, without objection.

I would ask you to summarize it in about 5 minutes or so because there is a fair amount of member interest who want to have a conversation with you.

Madam Secretary, you are free to start.

**STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE RENA BITTER, ASSISTANT
SECRETARY OF STATE, BUREAU OF CONSULAR AFFAIRS,
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON, DC**

Ms. BITTER. Thank you very much, and thank you, Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and esteemed members of the committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the work of the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs and to express my appreciation for the support that we receive from members of Congress and your staff.

The last time I had the opportunity to appear before this committee was at my confirmation hearing and at that time I called the people of the Bureau of Consular Affairs the truest of public servants, working under sometimes very difficult conditions on behalf of the American people, and after leading the bureau for 2 years, my admiration has only grown and it is a tremendous honor for me to be here today to directly represent the work of my colleagues.

The 13,000 people of the Bureau of Consular Affairs serve your constituents 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, all across the United States and the globe.

Mr. Chairman, in 2022, thanks to the efforts of our consular teams overseas, more than 18,000 international students studied in New Jersey, contributing over \$700 million to your state's economy and supporting more than 7,000 New Jersey jobs.

Ranking Member Risch, last fiscal year we issued nearly 6,000 visas to temporary workers, including agricultural workers filling critical labor shortages for Idaho ranchers, farms, and businesses.

Around the world, consular officers are protecting the lives and serving the interests of U.S. citizens and safeguarding our national security. They are present for your constituents' best and worst moments—births, deaths, adoptions, and illness. They worked in-person both domestically and overseas during the pandemic to keep serving the public at great personal peril.

Just last month, I attended a ceremony at the Department to honor Tom Wallace, a consular officer who helped U.S. citizens repatriate from Peru back to the United States in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic before losing his life to COVID-19. His name deserves a place in the congressional record.

When I have the opportunity to travel to our 29 passport agencies and centers and more than 240 overseas posts to meet directly with these extraordinary teams, I highlight three key priorities for the bureau, all of which I look forward to talking about today.

First, the safety and security of U.S. citizens overseas. As I mentioned earlier, this is the bureau and the Department's highest priority. Diplomats have been working to protect the lives and vital interests of U.S. citizens abroad since before the United States had a constitution. It is our highest and most enduring purpose.

Most recently in Sudan, we evacuated more than 2,000 U.S. citizens and their family members, along with lawful permanent residents, locally employed staff, nationals from allied and partner countries in a complex multinational effort.

Second, we are focused on maintaining record productivity in the face of unprecedented passport and visa demand. Demand for both U.S. passports and visas to the United States are at all-time highs.

At the same time right now more people than ever before have the ability to travel to and from the United States. Forty-six percent of Americans today have passports, up from 30 percent in 2008 and just 5 percent in 1990.

On the inbound travel side, more than 50 million valid visas are in the hands of foreign travelers. More people can visit the United States today than at any time in our history. These numbers are only growing and the Bureau of Consular Affairs is committed to meeting the demand today and in the future while rigorously safeguarding our national security.

While we remain focused on addressing historically high demand for passport and visa services, we are also planning for a more agile optimized future. To that end, our third priority is modernizing consular systems and technology.

For example, before the end of the year, 5 million Americans will be able to renew their passports entirely online, a major milestone in fulfilling our federal customer service goals.

We cannot make meaningful progress on these priority areas without sustained and significant investments in our IT infrastructure and staff. I am grateful for Congress' partnership during the darkest days of the pandemic when our fee-funded bureau took a sudden 50 percent decline in revenue.

Your appropriation and authorization to use consular revenue more flexibly has been the most important factor on our road to building a Bureau of Consular Affairs that is ready to tackle the challenges of the 21st century.

Making these flexible authorities permanent would ensure that we are able to weather any future contingency.

I thank you again for your continued partnership and I look forward to our discussion here today. Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Bitter follows:]

Prepared Statement of Ms. Rena Bitter

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and other esteemed members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the work of the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs and to express my appreciation for the support we receive from Members of Congress and staff for our mission. Of all the State Department's bureaus, the Bureau of Consular Affairs has a unique nexus with our colleagues in the legislative branch. We are the State Department bureau responsible for providing public-facing and customer-centric services for the American people, and as such we consider your constituents to be our constituents.

The public servants performing consular work operate in more than 240 overseas posts and 29 domestic passport agencies and centers. These dedicated staff are focused on several top priorities that serve and protect our people and country. I would like to highlight four of those priorities today as a baseline for our discussion.

PRIORITY: SAFETY AND SECURITY OF U.S. CITIZENS OVERSEAS

Our first priority has remained the same since the earliest days of our Republic: to protect the lives and serve the interests of U.S. citizens abroad.

Last month, Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland detailed before this Committee our most recent efforts to assist U.S. citizens impacted by the violence in Sudan. Through this effort, and in close coordination with our allies and partners, we evacuated more than 2,000 U.S. citizens and their family members, along with U.S. lawful permanent residents, locally employed staff, and nationals from allied

and partner countries. This was a complex and very successful multinational effort under the most difficult circumstances, and a high-profile illustration of the lengths our consular officers and local staff go to serve Americans overseas.

Across the globe, we serve our fellow citizens during some of their most important moments—births, adoptions, medical emergencies, deaths, arrests, and disasters. Thousands of U.S. citizens are arrested overseas each year, and consular officers help these detained citizens by ensuring they receive adequate medical care and fair treatment under foreign country standards and by facilitating communication between the citizen and their family. Consistent with the *Levinson Act*, Embassies and Consulates overseas continuously review all U.S. citizen arrest cases for indicators of wrongfulness and work with our offices in Washington to make these determinations when warranted.

PRIORITY: MAINTAINING RECORD PRODUCTIVITY IN THE
FACE OF UNPRECEDENTED PASSPORT AND VISA DEMAND

Demand for both U.S. passports and visas to the United States are at all-time highs. At the same time, due to the historic work of the Bureau of Consular Affairs, right now more people than ever before have the ability to travel to and from the United States. Forty-six percent of Americans have passports, up from 30 percent in 2008—and 5 percent in 1990. On the inbound travel side, in addition to the citizens of more than 40 visa waiver countries, more than 49 million still-valid visitor visas and border crossing cards are currently held by potential travelers to the United States who are free to visit this country. In fact, more foreign visitors have the ability to travel to the United States today than at any time in our history. These numbers are only growing, and the Bureau of Consular Affairs is meeting the demand.

In Fiscal Year 2022, we issued a record 22 million passport books and cards. We are on track to surpass that achievement in Fiscal Year 2023. Our focus is on ensuring all qualified U.S. citizen applicants can be travel-ready, and for millions of Americans to hold the most modern, secure, and durable U.S. passport book—the Next Generation Passport, which was fully rolled out in 2022. While our previous electronic passports (ePassports) are secure, the Next Generation Passport book uses new technologies to produce a more robust passport with enhanced security features, such as a polycarbonate data page, laser-engraved personalization, and updated artwork.

The Bureau and State Department have taken extraordinary measures to meet the current U.S. passport demand: we instituted an “all hands on deck” posture, and since January 1, we have authorized between 30,000 and 40,000 overtime hours per month for direct-hire personnel at our passport agencies and centers. In addition to our agency and center staff, who have been working full-time in the office since the summer of 2020, we have recruited volunteers, including State Department retirees, and assigned new Foreign Service Officers to work in Washington, DC’s Satellite Office. As a result, we issued 5.4 percent more passports and cards in the first 5 months of this fiscal year compared the same period in FY 2022’s record-breaking year. While we increased our adjudicative staff—10 percent in the last year alone, with more in the hiring pipeline—our estimates show it will require many more passport specialist positions to manage the unprecedented increase in workload. In our FY 2024 Consular and Border Security Programs budget request, you will note the most significant increase is to our salaries budget, where almost \$100 million will allow us to fill vacancies left over from the pandemic and add nearly 300 new positions throughout the Bureau of Consular Affairs.

Our current routine passport processing time—10–13 weeks—is an accurate reflection of current demand levels and is a timeframe we publicize widely. We anticipate no increase to current processing timeframes through the end of the fiscal year, allowing Americans to plan accordingly for their international travel. We are committed to keeping our customers, and you, informed.

In parallel, we are also experiencing pent-up demand for U.S. visas resulting from the near shutdown of international travel during the height of the COVID–19 pandemic. In some ways a distant memory, U.S. and foreign restrictions constrained our processing levels for 2 years or more before those restrictions were lifted. The pandemic and contemporaneous budget shortfalls left many posts significantly understaffed. Thanks to expanded expenditure authorities along with supplemental funding provided by the Congress, we were able to lift hiring freezes that had been in place until late 2021. It takes time to onboard and train new staff for these national security positions and, working with other bureaus in the Department, we are leveraging those authorities to increase substantially the number of consular adjudi-

cator positions filled in FY 2023 and to continue that trend into FY 2024, budget permitting.

Since the United States re-opened for travel, the State Department has streamlined visa processing and dedicated more resources to reducing wait times, consistent with national security. These efforts include surging staff overseas to adjudicate visa applications, working with DHS to exercise interview waiver authorities for low-risk visa applicants, and expanding the development and use of IT solutions to take advantage of capacity wherever it exists.

I want to emphasize we undertook these efforts without any compromise to national security or our obligations to review appropriately all visa applications. As a result of these efforts and tremendous productivity from our teams overseas, the Department has issued 22 percent more nonimmigrant visas over the same period in pre-pandemic 2019. While appointment wait times for visitor visa interviews remain higher than we would like in a few high-demand countries, we have reduced them substantially in recent months, and we are issuing more visitor visas in these high-demand countries now than we did before the pandemic. Fiscal year to date, we have issued more than 1 million additional nonimmigrant visas in our top four visa processing missions alone than during the same period in FY 2019—a 57 percent increase.

PRIORITY: MODERNIZING CONSULAR SYSTEMS AND TECHNOLOGY

While we remain focused on addressing passport and visa backlogs, we are also planning for a more agile, optimized future of consular processing. For example, our goal is that before the end of the year, eligible Americans will be able to renew their passports entirely online, a major milestone in fulfillment of our federal customer service goals. To that end, we concluded a successful pilot of the Online Passport Renewal program in March, which allowed us to take lessons learned and refine the system for the upcoming public launch.

We cannot make these enhancements without sustained and significant investments in our IT infrastructure and staff. The commitment and responsibility of the Bureau of Consular Affairs is to maintain and implement the highest cybersecurity standards and to recruit and retain the staff capable of doing so.

To achieve this, the Consular and Border Security Programs FY 2024 request of \$4.5 billion is the largest request we have ever made. It will allow us to respond to the highest demand for passport services in history and the pent-up demand for visa adjudications, while supporting our efforts to modernize complex IT systems that were built more than 20 years ago.

We continue to need expanded expenditure authorities for consular fees along the lines of those granted at the height of the pandemic. These authorities allow us to direct resources where they need to go to respond to emerging challenges and unexpected fluctuations in demand. We have been able to use fees from surging passport demand to cover U.S. citizens services costs, not only for complex crises such as in Sudan, but also for more routine crises facing the traveling public, such as administering the repatriation loan program for destitute U.S. citizens stranded overseas. They also allow us to manage unexpected fluctuations in demand, including by using the fees to hire additional officers for surging workloads.

PRIORITY: THE PEOPLE OF CONSULAR AFFAIRS

The final priority I highlight when I visit our teams throughout the bureau is our people themselves. The 13,000 foreign affairs professionals in the Bureau of Consular Affairs are the truest public servants I have ever known. They are present for our constituents' best and worst moments—births, deaths, adoptions, illness, and destitution. They serve America and Americans directly, and often do so in incredibly difficult circumstances. They worked in person both domestically and overseas during the pandemic to keep serving the public, and the death toll among our consular colleagues was significant. Whatever you see in world news each day—earthquakes, plane crashes, collapsed buildings—you can rest assured our consular colleagues are there to assist impacted U.S. citizens.

This includes, crucially, our locally-employed colleagues around the world, who are not only present to assist Americans in these crises, but also often are living through them personally. They are the institutional knowledge and lifeblood of our operations and we appreciate the attention of Members of Congress, including on this committee, to finding a legislative fix to allow those staff with qualifying, faithful service to immigrate to the United States without delay.

This country has had officials overseas protecting Americans since before it had a constitution. In fact, this responsibility is the reason we have missions overseas, and it is our most important shared responsibility. It is an honor to lead this bureau

and to engage further in discussion with you on the issues that affect us and the public we all serve.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. We will start a round of 5-minute questions.

As you know, back in April I highlighted in a letter to you long delays that New Jerseyans and Americans were facing to renew their passports and encouraging to work to bring their timeframe down, but some of my constituents have been shocked to learn that they still have to wait at least 3 months to get their passport renewed.

What news can you give us and Americans across the country who may be watching this hearing about the status of how long it is going to take to process a passport?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you for the question. I appreciate the opportunity to address it.

We are working very hard on all fronts to meet what is absolutely unprecedented demand. Last year we issued a record 22 million passport books and cards and this year we are on track to exceed that record maybe by as much as 15 percent.

As a result, processing times for passports are longer than we would like. We work very hard and in coordination with your staffs for which we are very grateful to publicize these times widely to help travelers plan—to make their travel plans.

I can talk a little bit about what we are doing to manage this demand. Obviously, our hard-working passport teams are on the front lines of this issue at our 29 agencies and centers. They are working tens of thousands of overtime hours, 170,000 just since the beginning of the year.

We are also aggressively hiring to augment the team. We have increased our staff by 10 percent this year and we have about 10 percent more in the pipeline.

We have teams of volunteers from across the Department working on surge teams, including retirees, adjudicators from—who have retired, and volunteers from our own headquarters staff, as well as new officers who adjudicate passports before they head out to their assignments.

The CHAIRMAN. How long is the backlog now?

Ms. BITTER. It takes about 10–13 weeks for regular processing time for a passport.

The CHAIRMAN. When would you expect to have it cleared up?

Ms. BITTER. The 10–13 weeks is an accurate representation of what it is taking us now to process passports. We do not anticipate raising that this year at all. Passport demand tends to be seasonal. I am reluctant to make predictions because this year is—

The CHAIRMAN. Do you have a backlog?

Ms. BITTER. What we have is passports waiting to be adjudicated. The processing time is a result of truly unprecedented demand.

The CHAIRMAN. You are saying that after the pandemic, the backlog that got created by that and all that, that is cleared? It is just that the regular normal time for processing a passport is 13 weeks?

Ms. BITTER. I can explain. If you do not mind, I can contextualize a little bit that question and it has to do a little bit with staffing and it is not unrelated to the pandemic.

When the pandemic hit and we lost 50 percent of our revenue overnight, we were—thanks to appropriations, we did not have to fire people, but we did have to freeze positions. Our passport adjudicators were working in-person and during that time period they worked in-person all through the pandemic.

As you know, not everybody is able to do that and our staff contracted during that period. When passport demand came back and we were able to start hiring people, we were working from a deficit.

Really, what we are dealing with is pent-up demand from the pandemic. When travel returned in late 2021, people were ready to travel again.

Our staff—it takes just a while to hire them, it takes a while to bring them on, and we also needed to wait for passport revenue to come back before we even had the funds to hire them. We are 10 percent up this year and we have 10 percent in the pipeline now.

The CHAIRMAN. I appreciate all that, but I think you failed to understand my question. Is the answer to this question that it is now going to take 13 weeks on average to expect to get your passport processed, yes or no?

Ms. BITTER. Into the future, we do not intend for that to be the permanent wait time. You will see in our—

The CHAIRMAN. The future is very infinite.

Ms. BITTER. Unpredictable.

The CHAIRMAN. The future being in 2 months, in 6 months, in a year? I am trying to—from my perspective, my role here is not to be adversarial, but I also need to understand in order to help, and I do not quite get from your answer what it is that is necessary.

It is not—let me take this position. It is not acceptable to wait 13 months—I mean, 13 weeks or 3 months for a United States citizen to get a passport. We have to do better.

The question is what is it that we need in order to do better. If that is additional staffing, if that is additional resources, if—I do not know what it is, but I am trying to glean that from you. I got everything you said. I appreciate the past. I appreciate the backlog. I appreciate the pandemic consequences.

That does not tell me how we are going to stop 13 weeks being the norm and then what timeframe we can do that. One—I have a lot of questions, but I am going to turn to my colleagues. One is, what do you need to bring that 13 weeks dramatically down? Two, assuming you get that, how long will it take to bring it down?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you for clarifying your question, Senator.

What you will see in our 2023 ops plan and also our fiscal year 2024 budget is requests for more staffing. That is one thing that—that is one way that we are going to address it.

We do not want to go into the future trying to hire and overtime our way out of these challenges. I mentioned the increase in percentage of Americans who have passports because we do not see this as an anomaly. We see this as a trend.

The way that we would like to address it into the future is by bringing on more staff so we can handle this and also investing in our technology and modernizing our processes.

The CHAIRMAN. Is the request in the budget, assuming it is granted, going to now significantly reduce the wait time? What do you think is the right wait time for an American to wait for a passport?

Ms. BITTER. Senator, I agree with you that our wait times right now are too long. I would have to—

The CHAIRMAN. Is the budget request going to ultimately help you reduce that significantly?

Ms. BITTER. Over the long term, we anticipate that this is a trend that we are going to have to address and it will—if we can hire the people that we need to address these long-term challenges and improve our technology.

The CHAIRMAN. I will come back to you.

Senator Risch.

Ms. BITTER. Thank you.

Senator RISCH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I concur with the chairman here. We certainly do not want to be hostile here. This is not a partisan issue, obviously. This is an American issue. We are all in this together trying to get it done.

Trying to drill down, the chairman was trying to get at how long the people should have to wait. Do you have a goal? Is there a stated goal that if somebody in New Jersey or Idaho or Utah or wherever—

Senator RICKETTS. Nebraska.

Senator RISCH. Nebraska. Do not forget Nebraska.

[Laughter.]

Senator RISCH. Do they get the—do they have—

Senator RICKETTS. Yes, we have passports. Yes.

Senator RISCH. All right. Anyway, what should they—what should be a reasonable expectation on a person's part? Forget everything else. Just from your experience, what should be—is it something like 2 weeks or 3 weeks? Or what should the expectation be?

Ms. BITTER. It is a little bit hard for me to answer that question. What we do is we try to give the American public an accurate—just an accurate picture of how long it will take so that they can plan their travel and so that they do not make plans without checking their passport.

Senator RISCH. When you give those expectations to the American public, what is that expectation? That is what we are after. What are you giving to the American public as that expectation?

Ms. BITTER. The expectation right now is the processing time is 10–13 weeks, and I know that you are trying to get at what is our goal, what is reasonable—

Senator RISCH. Sure.

Ms. BITTER. —what is shortest number, and I—what I would like to do is check and see what it was before the pandemic, but I will say that passport demand is seasonal and there are times during the year where it is higher and times during the year where it is lower, and we have consistently and historically let American citizens know how long our processing takes.

I think the challenge that we are facing now and that we hear from your constituents and we hear very clearly from you—

Senator RISCH. So do we.

Ms. BITTER. I know. Is that the timing—we have an overwhelming demand right now and so in giving an accurate portrait of the travel time, it is just more than people are expecting.

Senator RISCH. I think one thing that might be helpful is I find when somebody calls in and I chat with them, they are totally taken aback at how long it takes and they are—they say, well, we did not hear anything about this and I think that is a fair statement by them in that I know the Department wants to get the word out. You certainly do.

Now, maybe you ought to do it in public service announcements or something, but there needs to be a better penetration into the American public psyche about how long it takes for the passports.

Those of us that move in these kind of circles, we understand this, but the average person who maybe goes to Europe once in their life and needs a passport, they do not think about it until it becomes a problem. Maybe some penetration there would help, and I understand you still—you are getting over the backlog. I get that, but in any event, I think it is going to take more, there is no question about it.

I appreciate your comment about the 6,000 work visas for Idahoans, but that is a drop in the bucket with—we are 2 million people and there is a lot more need there.

I only got a short time left, but a lot of us were very concerned about what happened in Sudan. As you know, there was considerable criticism for the State Department in how that was handled.

Can you give us a thumbnail executive summary of what you think went wrong there? Admittedly, some things went right, but nobody focuses on that. They focus on what went wrong. That is what I want to hear about.

Ms. BITTER. Thank you. I appreciate your asking the question. It was a very difficult situation in Sudan, as I think that you know.

Senator RISCH. Has been for a long time.

Ms. BITTER. Right. We have—I appreciate your mentioning that. We have been advising Americans not to go to Sudan for a long time and, in fact, if they were there, to leave. The situation evolved very, very quickly.

What I will say about this evacuation is that it was really a true multinational effort and it assured the safe departure of 2,000 American citizens, family members, and others as well as thousands of nationals of other countries.

We facilitated, I think, as you know, three overland convoys and we also worked with our partners and allies to make sure that U.S. citizens were able to access allied flights that went out of the airport.

It took considerable diplomatic effort to make sure that we were able to conduct these evacuations and able to make the airport safe so that American citizens could leave that way with the assistance of our partners and allies.

Whether—again, it was an unusual situation that it was really truly multinational and so whether an American citizen left on a flight that had a British flag on it or a French flag on it, they

helped with—they left with the assistance of the United States Government and the facilitation of our task force and our folks on the ground.

I want to highlight one thing that I think is important. Our land convoys are really, really important for American citizens. I know that you are aware that American citizens often are closely related to non-American citizens and that is why in many instances, even though we advise American citizens to leave, it is really difficult for them to do so because they do not want to leave extended family members or even close family members who might not be documented for onward travel to the United States.

The convoys really helped those people to get to safety from Khartoum to Port Sudan and they might not have been able to leave otherwise. It might have been difficult for them to get on flights that would have to land in a third country.

It was a really important tool for us and also for our partners and allies.

Senator RISCH. Thank you. My time is up.

Just let me say one of the things my staff has been after, as you know, trying to get your input as to what plans you have for future situations like this that happened in the area. We have not gotten that yet. I hope you will double your efforts to get back to them on those inquiries.

Thank you.

Ms. BITTER. Thank you, Senator.

Senator CARDIN [presiding]. Thrilled to call Senator Romney.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I appreciate the work that you do. It is not an easy task by any means. I would note that in this day and age I think it is unreasonable to expect Americans to think it is going to take them months to get a passport, particularly a passport renewal, because they can—if they apply for a credit card where they are going to get thousands of dollars of credit from a bank, they can get the card in days and, yet, an American citizen who has had a passport for 50 years can wait months and months to get a passport.

It just does not make sense. I think we may need to adjust our—what the requirements are to get a renewal, what the technology is that we use to make that happen.

I would also note that my home state of Utah is, if not the fastest growing state in America, close to the fastest growing state in America. The demand for consular services is enormous in part because of the commerce there, but also because we have thousands upon thousands, some 50,000 missionaries, leaving from Salt Lake City every year, and the Mountain West region and particularly Salt Lake City is in what I will call a passport service desert.

The nearest passport agencies are—which are required for in-person visits are some 8 hours away. We have—I listened to the chairman indicate that in New Jersey, the population—how big is New Jersey, 10 million?

The CHAIRMAN. Nine million.

Senator ROMNEY. Nine million. My state is one-third that size and yet we have 200 people right now that are working through my office for emergency help.

We have four people in our office that are doing nothing besides emergency passport requests and the number of concerns we have is an enormous list. I would encourage you to fulfill the legal responsibility and the law that was passed the last year asking for the State Department to report on the geographic diversity and accessibility of passport agencies.

That is due in a couple of weeks and I expect that you will be able to perform that as required by law and I know that you are anxious to make that happen.

I would also hope that there is a way to increase staffing. Perhaps—I would like to build offices with a physical presence, but perhaps at least pilot projects of some kind that allow us to have individuals surged in areas like Salt Lake City or somewhere in the Intermountain West, Boise or wherever, where we can get services for people in the Intermountain West without having to drive as many as 8 hours for the needs for in-person views.

I would also note that in places like Israel I thought it was interesting when they do the homeland security checks for Israel, they ask medical students, law students, people receiving student loans, to surge capacity to do interviews, and I do not know what the opportunity is at the State Department to say we have got a lot of kids getting loans. We have got people in medical school. We have got people in law school. We could have them come in for summer work.

If you have surges in the summer or the spring, train them, qualify them, pay them, bring them in and have them help do some of the work that you are doing.

I would note that this—I would expect the surge to continue to grow with the Paris Olympics next year. People are going to be wanting to go to the Olympics, wanting to go to Paris and, like most Americans, they think that if they got 3 or 4 weeks before they go that they ought be able to get their passport renewed and they do not realize it is going to take 13 weeks because that is not the way anything else in America works. It is only dealing with government that things take this long, and so we basically have to get government to act more like some of the services we receive in the private sector.

Finally, I would ask that if you have data that you look at to see how you are doing—average length of time for a renewal, average length of time for a first time passport, percentage of people who cannot get their passport within that average, how many are above, how long the delays are—if you have data of that nature, I would love to see it.

I request that you provide it to this committee so that we can actually measure how we are doing. I am sure you have that and you are able to look at it, how many applications you received.

Can we get granular data from you on how this system is working? I think we desperately need it and hope that you will be able, one, to report on the progress towards a regional assessment of our needs, but, two, information on how well we are performing.

I know I did not get a question in there. I had a lot I wanted to say and I think—I see you nodding so I am assuming you find those things to be acceptable. Is that right?

Ms. BITTER. Absolutely. May I respond just very briefly?

Senator ROMNEY. You may, but I want to add one more—

Ms. BITTER. Yes, please.

Senator ROMNEY. —one more small thing. I will not ask the audience this. If my passport says it is going to expire in 6 months, I would expect if I was going to leave, let us say, when it has got 3 months left that I could go to Mexico and come back.

I think every American I know is shocked to find out that when your passport expires in 6 months, that you cannot leave—that you cannot leave the country. You have to include on the passport some kind of notice that says you may not leave the country if the passport expires within 6 months. It may just be to some countries, but, gosh, this is one of the reasons we have this huge backlog with emergency services. I am sorry.

Ms. BITTER. No, I really appreciate it and I appreciate the feedback, and I think people are surprised by the 6-month requirement that a lot of countries have. It is something that we include in our outreach, but clearly it is really hard to penetrate. When people are not thinking about—

Senator ROMNEY. Put a sticker on the passport that says this will not be valid going into many countries if your passport expires in 6 months.

Ms. BITTER. Yes. We have QR codes that lead to our public information, but you are right, that is something very much that should be highlighted in particular because it is really surprising.

I also just want to briefly highlight a couple of things, and thank you for raising the issue of geographic diversity of our passport agencies. It is something we really monitor a lot. We collect a lot of data on it.

I can throw out statistics at you, which will be unsatisfying, but we think that the best way for us to be able to serve the American public is through modernizing our systems and being able to surge our hiring.

It is really only about 5 percent of Americans who need access to emergency services for passports and we do have procedures in place and we work very hard including with all of your staffs for which we are enormously grateful to make sure that we are aware of those cases and they are drawn to our attention.

Sir, if there are cases in Salt Lake City that you need us to be aware of, we would really be grateful if you could set us up for success and let us know.

The one other thing I want to say and it is really true, hiring—we have increased our staff 10 percent this year and we have more in the pipeline. These are national security—every passport is a national security decision and bringing folks on in these positions—hiring, training, clearing, and making sure that they are suitable to have this really challenging job with a great deal of responsibility—does take time and it is something that we are working at very, very closely.

We are grateful, really grateful, to the support—for the support of Congress in expanding our spending authorities and allowing us to be able to move funding more flexibly to be able to continue that hiring. I want to end with thanks not just for the feedback, but also for all of the support.

The CHAIRMAN [presiding]. Just two final notes.

Fifty is the present backlog. We have a continuous process of closing them successfully at many. If I were to say, how many do we get over the course of a year, probably over a thousand, but 15 percent of—

Senator ROMNEY. I think 200 was just right now.

The CHAIRMAN. Yes. Fifteen percent of the American people who may need emergency services. Is that what you said, 15 percent?

Ms. BITTER. I am sorry, sir. It was 5 percent, if I was not clear.

The CHAIRMAN. Five percent. I am sorry. Five percent—I was calculating—is about 15 million people. That is still a lot of people.

Senator Ricketts.

Senator RICKETTS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Assistant Secretary Bitter, first of all, thank you very much for your service to our country and your long career in the Foreign Service.

I want you to know that I walked into this committee hearing sympathetic because I ran a business that experienced rapid growth and had to address customer needs. I know it is a challenge. You have got to bring on people and I am glad to hear that you are trying to get hired up as well.

That is not going to solve your problem. You need to address the system that you have got in place to be able to do that. Right now, do you have a backlog? I was given information that you have got a backlog of about 3 million passports. Is that accurate?

Ms. BITTER. Waiting to be processed. We may have slightly less than that now.

Senator RICKETTS. Slightly less than 3 million passports. I can tell you again, just sharing the experience in Nebraska, that a few years ago it was a couple a month that we would get asked for help. I am told in the Senate office my caseworkers now are saying we are getting five or six a day.

I know that, for example, when you start—when you are not processing things in a timely manner that actually adds to your work. You need to address the systems and I am looking at some information I was given here that a recent State Department Inspector General report found that Consular Affairs did not effectively manage its responsibilities related to passport IT modernization activities and that inner-department planning lacked project management processes, timelines, and milestones for key implementation decisions.

You just told us you do not even have a goal that you are trying to reach to be able to get to about whether it is 2 weeks, 3 weeks, 4 weeks, down from your 10–13 weeks.

Again, I have run large organizations, including most recently the state of Nebraska. If you do not set a goal, you are not going to get this number down. You have to set a goal first so that you can work backwards.

Remember, we all have heard it. Start with the NMI. Secretary Bitter, you have got to start with a goal first.

Second thing. Have you heard of Lean Six Sigma, which is a process improvement methodology? I would strongly recommend. I do not see it in your background, but get somebody on board who understands Lean Six Sigma.

At the state of Nebraska, we successfully implemented that. We did 900 projects—900,000 hours of saving our teammates time, but

basically it reduces the steps. For example, when we were doing an air construction permit, it was 110 steps long. We cut it down to 22 and we cut the time down from 190 days down to 65 days.

It sounds like—when I listen to the problems you have, if you implement something like Lean Six Sigma you will be able to help address some of these issues and it gets back to, again, just making sure that you are setting goals and benchmarking it.

One of the things I believe that the previous Administration did is that they released the number of pending passport applications and updated that figure weekly. Are you doing that? Are you releasing your backlog and updating that weekly?

Ms. BITTER. Releasing publicly, sir?

Senator RICKETTS. Yes.

Ms. BITTER. I am not aware that we are.

Senator RICKETTS. Would you be willing to consider that? Would you commit to releasing that number so we can, again, getting back to the chairman's point, help track where you are going with regard to your progress?

Ms. BITTER. We are very happy to consider any suggestions that the committee has.

Senator RICKETTS. Yes. I would—I think that would, again, helping us be able to understand where things are rolling out and how things are going to be able to do that.

I also want to hit upon two other topics—and I know I have only got a limited amount of time—first of all, with regard to what Senator Romney was saying. Again, Nebraska, the nearest office if you are driving is Minneapolis or Chicago. It is at least a 6-hour drive.

We just had a father and young daughter having to drive there. Anything we can do to kind of mitigate that. Kansas City—I would love Omaha—but anything like that if you can do it.

Then you talked about the consular—your declining consular service revenue and I believe that you have requested a statutory change in authorities, but you have not documented the analysis to support these requests. I guess my question is why is the State Department unwilling to apply the GAO's recommendations to perform and share the analysis with policymakers there so we are able to understand the impacts before taking legislative action?

Again, my concern is if you are going to change something in statute without providing a business case, that we are going to make—have unintended consequences. Is there a reason why the State Department has not wanted to follow the GAO's recommendation with regard to coming back with a plan on this?

Ms. BITTER. Thanks. Thank you, Senator. There is a lot to unpack there. Please let me know if there is—I will dive in and you let me know if there is things that you need for me to address specifically.

I want to just back up for—on a couple of things and I will start actually with our request for expanded spending authorities, which I think is one of the things that you have referred to.

When the pandemic hit and we lost 60—or 50, rather, percent of our revenue overnight, this—the Congress came to our rescue with appropriations. The other thing that it came to our rescue with was expanded spending authorities which allowed us to move money—

to move our resources to where challenges were emerging for us just to more flexibly use the revenue that we had.

I will give you an example of how we were able to use that, which is we were able to use increases in passport fees because we are completely fee driven. We were able to use increases in passport demand to be able to hire overseas adjudicators for our visa work, which is not something that we would have been able to do before.

Those authorities expire year-to-year and need to be renewed and what we are seeking is for them to be made permanent so that we are better able to plan along the lines of the challenges that we have had that you have identified.

With respect to IT and hiring, we want to be able to have a more secure year-to-year ability to plan for those big items and expanding authorities will allow us to do that. I can see that you want to jump in.

Senator RICKETTS. Yes. No, I am just going to—my time is up. I am going to interrupt you here and just say if you are going to want to make these changes, I cannot support anything without a plan and that is where I think that, again, the GAO recommended develop a plan, something about the cost model output is sufficient for the purpose. Again, just making sure we are lining up what you are charging for what the costs will be—

Ms. BITTER. Right.

Senator RICKETTS. —so we do not overcharge people. I would recommend that you follow the GAO's plan on that.

Ms. BITTER. Actually I would love if you are willing, Senator, for our staff to give you a briefing on that. We are—

Senator RICKETTS. Yes. Absolutely. That would be great.

Ms. BITTER. Yes. We are very data driven with respect to how much we charge the public.

Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Van Hollen.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Great to see you, Assistant Secretary Bitter, and a lot of my colleagues have covered the territory I was going to cover including Senator Ricketts just now so I want to turn to a couple other issues.

As you say in your testimony, our State Department personnel overseas could not operate successfully without loyal, locally employed staff. They are, as you say, the lifeblood of our operations and they often put themselves at great risk.

In fact, just 3 weeks ago, three members of our team—our embassy team—foreign nationals in Nigeria were brutally murdered in the line of duty doing advance work for an USAID DART team.

For over 70 years we have allowed these individuals after long and faithful service to emigrate to the United States with their families. Right now, we are facing a 14-year backlog between the time someone retires after 20 years of service and their ability to emigrate to the United States.

This week, Senator Tillis and I will introduce legislation called the *GRATEFUL Act* to address this issue. I just have one simple yes or no question for you on this matter. Is passage of this legislation a top priority for the State Department?

Ms. BITTER. Yes.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Appreciate that, and I look forward to working with others to get that done. I want to ask you about a letter—

The CHAIRMAN. Was that a leading question?

[Laughter.]

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Yes, indeed.

I want to ask you, Madam Assistant Secretary, about a letter that Senator Schatz, myself, and 14 others sent to Secretary Blinken and Mayorkas—sent it 2 weeks ago expressing our support for Israel's admission into our Visa Waiver Program, so long as they meet the requirements of U.S. law regarding reciprocal and equal treatment of all U.S. citizens regardless of race, religion, or national origin.

I have a simple question here, too. Do you agree that the condition of reciprocity and equal treatment must be met before admission into the Visa Waiver Program?

Ms. BITTER. Yes.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. We asked in that letter that we have a chance to meet with members of the Administration from the State Department and Homeland Security. Obviously, your portfolio is very involved with this issue. We asked for a meeting within 2 weeks. That was 2 weeks ago.

Can you commit to us today that you will meet with us within the next 2 weeks at the latest?

Ms. BITTER. Yes.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you.

Now, in that letter we pointed to a number of statements that exist today on the Government of Israel's foreign ministry website and other official websites that by their own terms would effectively discriminate against certain Americans based on national origin.

Would you agree that we could not move forward with a—even a trial period unless those clearly discriminatory guidelines are eliminated?

Ms. BITTER. Yes, and if I may, this is an issue that we take really seriously. The Visa Waiver Program, as you know, is an inter-agency program designed to increase law enforcement cooperation information sharing, and there is a threshold question of visa refusal rates, but there are many, many steps that a government has to meet before it can enter the program and reciprocity is one of them.

This is an issue that we are watching closely. We take it very seriously and we are keenly aware of the challenges that certain American citizens have had at Israel's borders and checkpoints.

We have made very clear to the Israeli Government that in order to meet its VWP—its Visa Waiver Program requirements—that it is going to have to treat all U.S. citizens and nationals the same regardless of national origin.

You will have heard, I am certain, Ambassador Nides talk about blue is blue. If you have a blue passport, you have a blue passport, and we would expect for all Americans to be treated the same.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. I appreciate that strong statement and I also expect that you will establish a system to monitor compliance

with that provision in the event that we go forward with the Visa Waiver Program. Is that right?

Ms. BITTER. Yes, it would be our expectation that they would be able to meet the requirement prior to designation so that we would be able to monitor implementation.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. I appreciate that.

Last question. With respect to your request for expanded budget authority—the ability to keep some of the fees that you are not allowed currently to keep, but also more flexible use of those you are—would that significantly improve the wait times which I appreciate all your efforts—it is incredibly frustrating, as you know, for those of us who are dealing with this, but would that make a material difference in terms of your ability to reduce the wait times?

Ms. BITTER. Yes. Thank you for that question.

I will talk just about a couple of the requests that we have and one other. The expanded spending authority will give us the ability to more—making permanent the expanded spending authority will give us the ability to more reliably plan year-to-year and for things like IT, for things like hiring, these are just—they are issues that bedevil us and they require long-term planning. They are huge priorities for us, particularly in terms of passports.

The other thing that we are requesting is you all very kindly—Congress—gave us the ability to retain the passport application execution fee and in FY22 the ability to spend the funds were limited to FY22.

We can now retain, but not spend, and I want to link that to the growth in the percentage of Americans that have passports. That means that they are going overseas and what we are seeking in being able to expend those funds is a dedicated source to be able to support them when they are overseas without having to borrow or to steal from visa fees.

That will give us a predictable source of funding for American citizens overseas, which is, of course, our highest priority. That will be able to withstand some of the shocks that we have experienced recently.

If I could indulge just one more priority, which is we are fee-funded and we are also part of the State Department. We rely on the management platform of the State Department for everything that we do and so if I could make one request, it would be to consider the full funding of the State Department.

A strong management platform is really important for our ability to be able to support your constituents. We rely on our very hard-working colleagues in the rest of the State Department and other bureaus for hiring, for training, for clearances, for contracts, all of the things that are important for us to be able to grow to meet this demand.

I appreciate your indulgence for me to be able to highlight that one priority.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. I will just say to my colleague that your legislation on helping those locally employed as a way to accelerate there, I would refer to the Judiciary Committee because it tweaks some

immigration law, but to the extent that we can be helpful, I am happy to do so.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Hagerty.

Senator HAGERTY. Thank Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Risch.

Assistant Secretary Bitter, it is good to see you in person. Thanks for the time that you spent with me on the phone. I appreciate you and your staff continuing to work with my team on the backlog of passports and visas.

We talked about this a bit yesterday. I hear a great deal from Tennesseans about the issue with respect to EB-3 visas for nurses. As you know, roughly two-thirds of the private hospital beds in America are managed out of Tennessee.

We feel this in a very acute manner, but it affects the entire nation, and we will have—my understanding—is a gap of about 200,000 nurses that we need to fill every year until 2030 to deal with the gap that has occurred because of retirements, the pandemic, et cetera, et cetera.

I appreciate the help that your Department will provide. You and I talked about a series of data. I am going to put that into the QFRs so I do not have to burden my colleagues with all of that, but that will hopefully inform us on the progress that you are making and give us some benchmarks, moving forward.

I would like to turn my next focus to an issue that concerns me and, I think, a great number of us with respect to how we deal with China's access to our education systems.

In May of 2020, former President Trump signed Presidential Proclamation 10043. That suspended the entry of Chinese students and researchers into the U.S. that are connected with China's military-civil fusion strategy. They call it MCF.

MCF is an effort by the CCP to fuse its private industries and institutions with its defense industry in order to advance China's economic and their military aspirations.

This proclamation is intended to stop the CCP from stealing from the United States world-class academic and research capabilities in order to build the Chinese military, and according to an April 11 Forbes article, the proclamation denies a visa to Chinese students who studied at a particular university whether or not any negative information exists about the individual, the focus being here on the university.

Assistant Secretary Bitter, I would ask you if you are willing to share the list of Chinese universities that are subject to this visa denial under the Proclamation 10043.

Ms. BITTER. Thank you for that question, Senator, and I am aware of the prohibition against issuing visas to graduate students at certain universities. I do not know that there is any prohibition. I just need to—I would love to be able to check and get back to you on it.

Senator HAGERTY. I will bring something to your attention. It is a great concern of mine, but I think about the top universities—Beijing University, Tsinghua University—there in China.

I do not believe they are on this list. Tsinghua University, for example, has eight national defense laboratories. Tsinghua receives

funding from the PLA. Tsinghua does joint training with the PLA in computer science re: cybersecurity.

This certainly sounds like military-civil fusion to me and I think it is something that would be a concern to all of us. Thank you for taking a look at that and I would appreciate you getting back to me with where we are on that and where we may be going.

I would also just like to reiterate the point that Senator Van Hollen made about Israel and their ability to get into the Visa Waiver Program. I think the relationship that we have with Israel is absolutely critical.

There is an aim for visa—I am sorry, for Israel to meet the Visa Waiver Program requirements by September of this year and I have seen some analysis that suggests that if Israel were able to participate in the program, it would result in 450,000 additional visitors coming from Israel to the United States over a 3-year period.

If you think about that in terms of economic benefit, that would be \$3.6 billion, roughly, of economic benefit to the United States and it would support roughly 6,000 jobs.

I have a real interest in seeing that sort of economic engagement as a benefit of this program and it certainly sounds to me that you are committed to working on this.

I understand the reciprocity issues that you and Senator Van Hollen discussed. I just want to make certain that you are willing and will make every effort to work with Israel in helping them comply with whatever requirements may exist and stand in the way.

Ms. BITTER. Thank you, Senator. That is something that we work very closely with the Department of Homeland Security on and our colleagues there are—we are all very engaged on this. Thank you for raising it. We will continue to work.

Senator HAGERTY. Thank you. I would very much like to see the Visa Waiver Program put in place with our ally Israel. Thank you so much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Senator Schatz.

Senator SCHATZ. Thank you. Excuse me. Thank you, Chairman.

I want to start in the Pacific Islands. The Secretary's FY24 budget request language has planned new posts in Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu and it mentions funding for reporting and diplomatic security positions, but was silent on consular staffing and services.

Is the Department going to offer routine American citizen and visa services at each of these posts?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you for that question, Senator.

When new posts open, we are part of a much broader department effort to figure out what the correct footprint is, what the right staffing is. One thing I will highlight is that we do provide visa services now to folks that are resident in those places and we are always very attentive to American citizen services wherever Americans are.

I think we are, again, as part of—we are still sort of figuring out what the footprint is going to look like there, but I can assure you

that we will do everything that we can do to make sure that we serve the people in those communities to the best of our ability.

Senator SCHATZ. Well, I did not hear a yes and I understand resources constraints, but it does not seem to me that we are appropriately raising expectations about our relationship with these nations and trying to be more present and trying to be more responsive and seems to me, especially when you are establishing a physical presence and then you have somebody coming in episodically to process some of these relatively routine applications, it may undermine the basic point of all of this, and that is where I am coming from is that “in for a dime, in for a dollar,” that is my philosophy.

On the other hand, if you do not have the dollar, I get it, but I would like us to understand this as a strategic thrust of the Department of State and if we kind of cut off our own legs by not providing the services that one would expect with a physical presence, then I think we are saving a little bit of money, but undermining our basic strategic thrust.

Ms. BITTER. I understand, and one thing I will say, Senator, is as we are part of these planning processes, whether in for a dollar, in for a dime, absolutely, or vice versa.

We do spend a great deal of time trying to really ensure that we are projecting physical presence to the extent that we possibly can and we are very attentive to all of the things that you just said. I appreciate your raising them.

Senator SCHATZ. Thank you. We will track that with you.

Hawaii is going to host the Festival of Pacific Arts and Culture in June of 2024, 3,500 participants, including senior officials from 28 countries, throughout the Asia Pacific region.

FestPAC is a real opportunity. I mean, it is cultural event, but it is a real opportunity to strengthen ties between the United States and the people and the governments of the Pacific Islands.

The success of this event is going to depend on efficient visa processing for a lot of Pacific Islanders for whom Auckland and Sydney are the most convenient visa processing posts. Long wait times—149 days are at least what we are being told is the wait time for B-1/B-2.

Can I have your commitment to work with us to reduce those wait times to make sure that to the degree and extent that we have an opportunity to kind of celebrate our shared values, to strengthen our friendships, and even to align better strategically.

I can tell you as a senator from the state of Hawaii, there is a saying in Hawaii, everything in Hawaii is political except politics, which is personal, and this is a real opportunity for us to build those person-to-person ties.

It does not work if the State Department is the rate-limiting factor. Can I just have your commitment to work this through?

Ms. BITTER. Absolutely, and we have, sir, a business visa unit that handles events and cultural activities and conferences just like this to make sure that folks are able to participate in them. Those kinds of people-to-people ties are enormously important. We recognize our strong responsibility in that area.

Senator SCHATZ. Great. In the interest of time, I am going to condense my question about the Philippines and visa processing. We

are told it is still 149 days for B-1/B-2 just to get an interview and Hawaii employers in particular are asking my office to do something about that.

I get that 149 days is fewer than it used to be relatively recently, but what are you doing to reduce that number of days to land in a reasonable place?

Ms. BITTER. Right.

Senator SCHATZ. Because 149 is better than 300. It is still awful.

Ms. BITTER. I appreciate that, and if I could just take a minute to talk a little bit about our really hard-working teams in the field where I really appreciate your raising this.

We have been working with DHS and others to maximize our legal authorities, to waive interviews for low-risk travelers, and also to take advantage of improving technology to just increase our global capacity.

In the nonimmigrant visa side, the result is that now fiscal year-to-date, we are 20—we have produced 22—issued 22 percent more visas than we did this time prepandemic. We are really extraordinarily productive.

It is true that wait times for first time, tourist visas are longer than we would want at some posts, but in places like the Philippines and elsewhere, virtually every other category, visa wait times and processing times is at prepandemic levels or below.

I also just want to highlight that we work very closely with our colleagues at posts to make sure that there are procedures in place for emergency travel.

I mentioned our business visa unit. We are very, very committed to this and we are really, really proud of the work that our folks in the field have done.

Thank you.

Senator SCHATZ. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Senator Risch.

Senator RISCH. Yes, thank you. Do you have any idea about what percentage of your applications are renewals for a passport?

Ms. BITTER. I believe it is 25 percent.

Senator RISCH. About a fourth of them are renewals?

Ms. BITTER. Please do not hold me to that, but I will confirm and get back to you.

[EDITOR'S NOTE.—The requested information referred to above follows:]

Answer. Approximately 40 percent of passport applications are renewals submitted using the DS-82 application.

Senator RISCH. Senator Menendez and I were just talking. We did some quick research and determined that the 10-year period is statutory, which means we set it originally—we, the Congress, set it, which also means we can change it.

What would you think of the idea of changing it to a point where after persons had one for 10 years, their next application could be for a permanent passport? Because, look, if we got problems, we pull somebody's passport, whether it is during the first 10 years or anytime thereafter and it seems to me if they had one for 10 years and there was no problem, there is no reason you could not issue

them a permanent passport, which, of course, could be terminated at any time for problems.

What would you think? That seems to me it would cut back at least some the workload you have on applications for renewals.

Ms. BITTER. We would be very happy to work with you on any ideas that you have along those lines, sir.

Senator RISCH. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The CHAIRMAN. Well, whether it is permanent or a longer period of time seems to me that there is nothing magical about the 10 years unless either the Department or the Department of Homeland Security can give us insights as to why 10 years is magical.

If it is not magical, that there is something special that 10 years is the catch all to find something, then I agree with Senator Risch. We should think about extending the time period.

It would save money. It would dramatically reduce time. It would give people greater flexibilities. I am not sure why—absent some insights, I am not sure why we should not consider statutorily extending the time and would look forward to having that visit with you.

Senator Risch and I are going to send you a letter. I have been at this 30 years and I will say this—my words, not yours—but there is a reticence when we are asking you what it is that you need. I do not quite get a clear picture of what you need.

Maybe you feel that you cannot ask because the Department does not want you to ask or the hierarchy—I get all of that. I am going to put you on the spot and I am going to send a copy to the secretary as well—John—and I am going to ask you what authorities, resources, personnel, budget, automation, technology, or anything else that you need in order to bring this down to what I think most Americans would consider a reasonable period of time, and I would expect an answer to that in a very short period of time since you have been studying this. In this way, you are responding to the committee's questions and nobody at the Department should be upset about responding to the committee's questions.

Senator Cardin.

Senator CARDIN. First, Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing.

Ms. Bitter, it is always good to see you. I apologize for not being here for the whole hearing. I am ranking—I am chairman of the Small Business Committee and we were having a meeting of the Small Business Committee and I had to participate in, and I know that the delays in passport visa applications has been the center of this discussion today.

I am going to sort of take this from a little bit different angle in my request. Just so you know my circumstances in Maryland, we get between one to two dozen calls a day on challenges on passports or visas or something to deal with similar situations and we are somewhat at a loss as to how to help our constituents. That is unacceptable.

I am with the chairman. We want to make sure you have the tools so there is a reasonable process in place and you had—we can tell that you can get your services done in an efficient way. We want all that done.

In the meantime, where we are today, our constituents need to know what path they need to take in order to be able to get the passport or visa that they need and, unfortunately, that is not the case.

We hear that it may be, I do not know, 6, 8 weeks to get a passport—10 weeks, 12 weeks—and there is an expedited process that shortens it a little bit. There is emergency procedures that shortens it more, and you need an appointment. You cannot get an appointment. Your local office is closed. You shop around the country to try to find an office where you can expedite it. Some people travel—a person traveled last week up to Buffalo from Baltimore in order to get an appointment only to find out that—one of my colleagues from New York told me they were able to get an appointment in DC.

It just does not make sense. We need to have clear direction so that we can advise our constituents appropriately. We understand that emergencies are defined as emergency, but if a person is traveling, let us say, 10 weeks or 12 weeks from now, 3 months from now—they file for an application. The application for the passport renewal was not received. Now it is 4 weeks. Should they be contacting you to get it because they are now 4 weeks away? Two weeks, should they be contacting you or not—1 week away?

What are the rules here? Unless we have some understanding what the rules are all about, how can we help you in regards to the current situation?

Yes, let us improve the current situation. Let us give you the resources you need, but we need to be able to deal with the requests of our constituents so they understand their options.

We tell them to take—cannot plan a trip unless you have 6 months advance notice. That is the rules? We do not like it, but at least we can tell them that.

How can we get clear information out to the people of our community and why would it be so different for someone from Maryland having to go up to New York and someone from New York having to go back to DC in order to get their appointments?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you, Senator, and I appreciate the frustration that I know that your constituents are feeling, particularly about trying to find an appointment at a close counter.

I will simply say on that, that our emergency and expedited services at our counters, they are doing across the network 23,000 emergency appointments a week. They have added weekend hours. They have added—they have extended their hours. There it is pre-pandemic and better in terms of the number of people that they are trying to see.

Sometimes it is true folks might have to travel to find an appointment. We always will work with your staff, as you know, sir, and we are so grateful to members and their staff for drawing cases to our attention that do require emergency appointment.

Given the volume that we are seeing and the number of people that require appointments, we will do everything that we can do to accommodate people with humanitarian emergency needs.

It is a little bit harder for us always to accommodate leisure travel. What we try really, really hard to do is to publicize wait times so that Americans can plan their travel. We try really hard to

make sure Americans understand that before you plan your trip, you should look at your passport and to take into consideration processing times. We—

Senator CARDIN. They do not know what the processing time is. We were told one time it was 8 weeks, another time it was 12 weeks, and we have people who have—who could not get their passports within that period of time.

Ms. BITTER. Yes.

Senator CARDIN. Then there are the emergency situations in which you do not consider it an emergency because it is leisure travel, but they applied 12 weeks ago. They think they have complied with the rules. They think it is an emergency.

Ms. BITTER. Oh, understood. Absolutely.

Processing times do vary and change and we keep them posted on our website, and one of the things that we are very lucky to have is 29 passport agencies and centers.

We do a tremendous amount of outreach. We work with your staffs to try to get this information out there. Our passport agencies and centers do the same.

I absolutely hear you that people do not hear it until they need it. We will work to ensure that we are doing everything that we can do to penetrate and make sure that we are getting this information out there, and we are grateful for the partnership of your staffs in doing that.

Senator CARDIN. Thank you for your commitment to this. We know it is not an easy task. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Booker.

Senator BOOKER. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

First of all, I know how hard a lot of the folks work and how you share a lot of the frustrations that you are hearing right now. I obviously have the same experience with a lot of constituent calls and just not even understanding often how the wait times are. The earliest appointments often somebody can schedule come from different states. It is a bit of a maze and I am hoping that the passion that you are hearing from a lot of the senators now could help us to lead to some solutions.

I am wondering, maybe constructively, to see about staffing vacancies in general and to what extent are staffing vacancies at high demand posts like in Pakistan, Nigeria, and Haiti delaying appointments for immigrant visa applicants in regards to those countries, which we get a lot of calls, I am sure Senator Menendez and I both, in our state of New Jersey.

Ms. BITTER. Right. I appreciate that question. I will talk a little bit about staffing and I will talk just in general about our immigrant visa.

Senator BOOKER. Yes, and I am just going to put, while you are talking about vacancies, just in the same vein, does Consular Affairs have acute staffing shortages in posts that adjudicate high volumes of work study applicants? That is another area.

Then something my office hears a bit about is do you have a view that there are—well, I will stick with those staffing vacancy questions first.

Ms. BITTER. Okay. Great. Thank you.

We are talking specifically about immigrant visas, so let me just mention—you have mentioned our highest—some of our very high volume posts in that respect.

We do have staffing. We have not yet—let me put it this way. The Department has not yet filled all of the vacancies that were frozen. We froze positions during the pandemic when our—when our revenue went down.

Thanks to Appropriations we were not—we did not have to fire people, but we did have to freeze positions. We were able to begin hiring again, again, thanks to expanded spending authorities, which we hope to make permanent.

We were able to begin hiring again in about—I think it was January of—I do not quite remember, but I think it was January 2021, was the first—January 2022, rather, was the first class of people we were able to bring back in.

It takes time to hire and train these folks to go out overseas. We do still have staffing gaps in some of our positions, especially at some of the higher volume posts, because they have the most number of positions that were frozen, but we expect—the Department expects to be able to fill those positions by the end of this fiscal year.

That said, you will see in our ops plan and our request for appropriations we are seeking to hire even more people to be able to address what we absolutely believe is going to be—

Senator BOOKER. I appreciate that. I have got a really rough chairman here. He is tough on me. I want to get some more questions in before he cuts me off.

Ms. BITTER. Okay.

Senator BOOKER. We know that the call for the immediate release of Evan Gershkovich despite concerns that Russian Government is using him and other high-profile cases to gain political leverage, what role has Consular Affairs played in this case of Mr. Gershkovich?

How does Consular Affairs Hostage Affairs Unit coordinate with the State Department in cases like these and is the State Department considering any policy changes for the wrongfully detained terminations and reassignment of these cases to the Office of the Special President Envoy for Hostage Affairs?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you for that. I am going to just quickly brag about immigrant visas. We have reduced the backlog of cases by 24 percent this year and the productivity in immigrant visas is 20 percent where it was prepandemic. We are moving through that and I appreciate your raising it because we know that immigrant visas and family reunification is a huge priority for Congress.

Moving on to wrongful detention, we work really closely—first of all, many, many thanks to Congress and in particular this committee and the staff of this committee for the *Levinson Act*, which is an enormously powerful tool in our toolkit in terms of identifying and figuring out what we can do to assist American citizens who may be wrongfully detained overseas.

We work in lockstep with our colleagues in the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs Office to implement the *Levinson Act* and we work with them closely to make sure that we are implementing the act in the way that it was intended.

One thing I will highlight with respect to the Bureau of Consular Affairs, we are—we care about all detainees. There are 1,700-plus American citizens detained overseas and our job is to make sure that we advocate for them for the best possible treatment, that we advocate for their—for humanitarian treatment—

Senator BOOKER. For that I am grateful and I know a lot about, but I am wondering about this specific idea of reassigning the cases to the Office of Special Presidential Envoy.

Ms. BITTER. Right. When somebody is determined to be wrongfully detained, the leadership of the case moves to the SPEHA office, we call it, but the actual day-to-day visiting, the actual day-to-day face of the Department for that wrongful detainee will be a consular officer at a post overseas.

Senator BOOKER. Okay. Just real quick, what steps has the State Department taken in response to a criticism I hear a lot, that families of U.S. citizens detained abroad receive insufficient information about their loved ones and when Consular Affairs provide a list of attorneys to U.S. citizen family members or next of kin, does it indicate which ones speak English? If some embassies do list attorneys that speak English, what efforts is the Department taking to standardize the practice at all overseas posts? This is a lot of incoming that we get.

Ms. BITTER. Thank you. This is the first that I have heard of that complaint. We do maintain lists of attorneys and as I mentioned we are—we work really hard to make sure we are doing everything we can to support detainees overseas, especially to ensure that they are connected with their families.

If I may have our team get back in touch with your team.

Senator BOOKER. Absolutely. Again, I know—

Ms. BITTER. Thank you.

Senator BOOKER. —from working with your office, a lot of the commitment of the people that work there. There are understandable frustrations and I hope we can just continue to work together.

Ms. BITTER. I appreciate it. If you hear things and we do not know about them, then we cannot fix them, so we are grateful.

Senator BOOKER. Okay, and I will give my thanks to the benevolency of the chairman of this committee.

The CHAIRMAN. I was going to say you made that comment about being tough. You are 2 minutes over your 5 minutes. You had 7 minutes and I did not even bang the gavel. I do not know what you are—

Senator BOOKER. Your grace and magnanimity is obvious and I am appreciative.

[Laughter.]

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Kaine.

Senator KAINE. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and actually you enabled me to catch my breath and figure out what I wanted to ask.

Senator BOOKER. That is exactly what my purpose was in going over.

[Laughter.]

Senator KAINE. I know that my colleagues have raised issues about visa and passport delays and I do not need to go into that.

My Virginians are experiencing the same thing and I know there are a lot of reasons for it—the COVID-related backlogs, et cetera.

Also, with COVID restricting travel, everybody has saved their travel and then they all want to travel at the same time.

I get this, but I know my colleagues have asked about it and I wanted to just put that on the record as well. I just hope that we can really, really whittle that down.

Here is a particular one that is about Virginia, that may not be completely in your bailiwick. That is part of the problem with this issue, everybody says it is not in their bailiwick, but I want to put it on State's radar screen.

In the fall of 2021, the Northern Virginia Emergency Response System—NVERS—which is a coalition of Northern Virginia local governments, especially health departments, at providers like Inova, our largest hospital organization.

Inova stepped up to provide vital support in terms of patient tracking, transport, and medical services for the evacuees who were coming to the United States from Afghanistan.

Most of the evacuees from Afghanistan came in to Dulles Airport. A few—a small percentage started to come in through the Philly airport, but they came to the Dulles Airport. They were initially processed at a convention center near the Dulles airport and during this processing they had medical needs. There were pregnant women. There were people that were being tested for COVID, were testing positive.

They had a lot of medical needs, and the Federal Government asked the Northern Virginia medical community to step up and provide services during that really important time, and I am really proud of the fact that our medical community did step up.

Then the evacuees were dispersed to eight military bases around the country, three of which were in Virginia, but in particular during this period in Virginia, there is about a \$687,000 bill that these—the medical folks were glad to step up, but they were not doing it for free, and they were told if they provided services they would be reimbursed and yet they have never been reimbursed.

It is \$687,000 and they have kind of been sent around—well, no, it is DHS' issue. No, that is State's issue. No, that is HHS' issue.

Senator Warner and I have been working on this. We have written a letter to all the relevant agencies saying, well, we do not care who pays it and if you want to divide it in three, that would be okay as well, but I remain concerned that here we are, nearly 2 years later and these critical partners, NVERS, who stepped up to provide services to people who needed them have yet to be reimbursed.

I just want to kind of put that on your radar screen and the reason—it is not just in the rearview mirror. Dulles is still being used as the place where, for example, when we bring in 220 political prisoners liberated from prisons in Nicaragua, including presidential candidates that the Ortega regime threw in jail, they come in. They need medical service.

The Northern Virginia community wants to be there and provide service, but the experience that they had with the Afghan evacuees makes them think, well, are they just going to tell us we will be reimbursed to not get reimbursed.

I would like to secure that are all—make sure my team gives you all the information on this, but I think these folks after 2 years are

entitled to be reimbursed and not just be sent from one office to the other in kind of a shell game.

Ms. BITTER. Understood. I appreciate your raising it and we will follow up.

Senator KAINE. Great.

One last item. In 2011, Consular Affairs initiated ConsularOne, this initiative to modernize, consolidate, or replace functionality of 90 different discrete consular legacy technology systems and put it into a single framework.

The OIG estimated that as of June 2021, the costs for the ConsularOne initiative dating back to 2011 range between \$200 million and \$600 million.

Now, the fact that that range is so broad and the OIG could not even say what the cost was to more specificity than that is a little bit odd.

The initiative predates your arrival at the bureau, but the OIG's most recent recommendation about this shows that there are six recommendations from December 2021 that continue to remain open without action.

Do you know what the process is for implementing these remaining six recommendations about the ConsularOne initiative?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you for raising that.

If I could just sort of put this in a somewhat broader context—
Senator KAINE. Please.

Ms. BITTER. —including to highlight that modernizing our technology is just a hugely important part of what we need to do including hiring IT professionals and all of the other staff that comes along with being able to have a stable platform and a system that is agile enough to be able to not just keep up with the demands and needs, but also to help us get ahead.

Our systems are incredibly complex. They are at 240 posts overseas, 29 passport agencies and centers domestically. They are required to be available 24/7/365 and also to talk to all of the other national security systems that the U.S. Government maintains.

They are really, really complex. We have made great strides in the last several years on the—to modernize and stabilize the platform. Many of our systems are 20 years old, so investing in the platform and ensuring that it is always available when it needs to be available has been a huge focus.

Now we are asking—you will see in our 2023 ops plan and our 2024 budget a request to be able to augment and to be able to continue to invest in technology. We cannot hire our way, and we do not want to, out of the challenges that we have in terms of increasing workload, which is a trend. It is not an anomaly.

Senator KAINE. Here is what I would like to do. I am over my time, but I think what I will do is, I will do a QFR and I will list each of the six recommendations that were deemed open by the OIG in December 2021, and I will ask what is the progress on implementing or closing this recommendation. I will just ask that about each of the six and I think that is probably a better way to do this than to try it here.

Ms. BITTER. That would be great. We have a—we would be grateful to be able to tell the story. Thank you.

Senator KAINE. Okay. You bet. Thank you. Thanks, Mr. Chair.

The CHAIRMAN. I have some final questions, Madam Secretary. Whether it was 3 years ago when COVID-19 first hit, or 2021 when Afghanistan fell to the Taliban and most recently in Sudan when Khartoum saw a rapid development of violence in the capital, the Department of State has undertaken several repatriation programs for Americans abroad.

While I believe that our consular officers perform admirably under the Herculean task they were directed to do, what are some of the big lessons that the State Department has learned from these repatriation efforts?

What additional or different planning, structure, staff, or modes of operation do you think are necessary so that we are better prepared for future contingencies of this sort?

I have been thinking about in the State Department reauthorization legislation that we are doing, whether there should be a permanent crisis intervention department because these things are going to happen and putting it all together for a specific moment, whether it be Sudan or anything else, is not as good as having a system in place that can, largely, respond to any set of circumstances anywhere on the globe.

Any takeaways for the committee to be thinking about?

Ms. BITTER. Yes. Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to answer that question.

The bureau is part of, as I am certain you are aware, a department-wide and interagency effort to constantly be preparing for crises and trying to anticipate where they may occur.

In terms of lessons learned, for us all, crisis response starts with information. We are working hard to improve our delivery of information and we are always looking at ways that we can assist American citizens and better inform them about changing circumstances so that they are prepared and can make informed decisions about places that they travel.

I think you are—when you talk about a permanent crisis—standing up a permanent crisis intervention—so the two things that that makes me think of are—one is contained in our budget request, which is what we would like to do is to be able to develop—part of our funding request is to—we have a 24/7 call center that is available to American citizens in crises.

We would like to be able to develop that further and to expand it to be able to make it more user-friendly and more available to American citizens all the time and in a crisis as well.

The other thing that we have done—and this goes also to our IT infrastructure—one of the things that we really saw after Afghanistan was a real demand, a real need for us to be able to develop systems that allow us not just to track American citizens in a crisis, but also to communicate directly with them and to be able to gather better data about where they are and what their intentions are. We developed that after Afghanistan and we have been able to use it to good effect—great effect, in fact—in Ukraine and in Sudan.

When we talk about investing in IT solutions and being able to plan and being able to get ahead of the demands that we see we want to be able to do things before we have to respond. We want

to be able to plan in advance and take advantage of all of the newest technology.

The CHAIRMAN. Should we require Americans who are traveling abroad to ultimately register with the State Department or with the embassy—the U.S. embassy in that country? Because that would give us a—to the extent that they comply, it would give us a list in the moment of emergency as to who is there.

Ms. BITTER. I know that there are members of Congress who have floated that and that it is under discussion. We are very happy to participate in those conversations, and you are absolutely correct that we do not track Americans and we know that Americans do not like to be tracked and so we are happy to participate in any conversations on that.

The CHAIRMAN. I do not see it as tracking them. I see it as protecting them. If I do not know you are someplace, I cannot protect you until you ultimately let me know that you are there, and if you are already in the crisis mode and then you let me know that you are there, it is better than not knowing, but it is not as good as knowing in advance.

Let me turn to a different aspect of the work that you do—we have spent a lot of time on passports—but visa processing. My office and I suspect others receive a regular stream of complaints about the Department's transparency and communication and sometimes its agility and responsiveness when it comes to processing visas for a non-American family of U.S. citizens to visit the United States, for student visas, the work and business visas.

I get it. If you do not get a visa, you are not happy. That is not what I am concerned about. I understand the threshold about not being a public charge, provisions of the law which is—but here is what I often hear and personally have seen and experienced firsthand, which is that as someone is trying to make the case that they will not be a public charge, that they have roots in their country, that they have a job, that they have maybe some money, that they have the things—property—the things that would help a consular office decide whether this person is going to overstay their visa or be a public charge or anything like that, is that there is a perfunctory—people tell me all the time I went up to the—I waited so long. I went up to the window. I was trying to make my case and the consular officer looked at my file and said, “I am sorry, you are rejected.”

Even if that was the right decision, just for argument's sakes, the process of going ahead—this is America's face to the world and that process in which people feel that they do not have a fair process or transparent as to how decisions were made. Is there work that you are doing in this regard?

I understand it is a tough job and you can—that is why I always go see—whenever I travel abroad and visit our embassy, I always insist that the consular officer be part of my meetings because I know what a tough and generally ungrateful job it is.

It still requires—a lot of us do tough and ungrateful jobs—it still requires doing it in a way that at the end of the day puts forth the best foot of America. What do you do in that regard?

Ms. BITTER. Senator, I do not know if you recall, but you raised this with me in my confirmation hearing—I was very grateful to

hear it—and you also mentioned in the last chief of mission conference that you insist on consular officers being included in meetings, and I have quoted you many, many, many times.

I am really grateful to you for raising these issues and then for recognizing and highlighting the importance of our work. We are acutely aware—we are—it is our primary responsibility. Overseas, certainly we are the face of America and we are very aware of that.

We work really, really hard in training with our managers and with our officers to remind them that that is a privilege and a responsibility and that everybody must be treated with respect.

You have highlighted some of the challenges with that. Communication is imperfect. It is a high stress situation for visa applicants and we incorporate all of those things in our training with our officers.

The other thing that we highlight for them is for new Foreign Service officers in particular, the reason that they—that we—one of the reasons that we ask them to do this kind of work at the beginning of their career is as a reminder that people-to-people ties and our ability to communicate and to treat respectfully host country nationals is the foundation of our work and the foundation of people-to-people ties and it is really important.

I appreciate your raising it and I will continue to quote you, and we will do our best to make sure that we do everything that we can do to fulfill that.

The CHAIRMAN. I hope that even after someone gets the job and are doing it, that there is some type of—I do not want to call it sensitivity training, but nonetheless some type of training that constantly—it is, basically, in a sense a customer service training, that—I often have people who work for me in this regard and the beauty is when somebody still does not achieve what they want, but they are still thankful that they had the opportunity. That is not an easy touch to have, but it makes the world of difference for the individual.

Ms. BITTER. It is what we ask.

The CHAIRMAN. It gives them a sense that government actually is responsive to them.

Ms. BITTER. It is what we ask them to do and it is expected of them.

The CHAIRMAN. Two final questions.

On May 19, *The New York Times* reported that in advance of their evacuation by U.S. military personnel from Sudan, U.S. diplomats in Khartoum destroyed passports left by Sudanese nationals with the U.S. embassy prior to the April 15 outbreak of fighting.

According to *The New York Times*, some of the destroyed passports belonged to Sudanese staff members of the U.S. embassy. Sudanese whose passports were destroyed were stranded in Sudan, unable to leave due to the lack of travel documents.

Can you describe the procedures that led to the destruction of foreign passports by an embassy and how many passports were destroyed, from what nationalities, and did the U.S. embassy also destroy the passports of Sudanese staff as reported by *The New York Times*?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you. Senator, from your travels that embassies and consulates contain a tremendous amount of sensitive ma-

terial, whether it is classified information or PII, medical records, things like that, and there are strict rules to be followed when a post suspends operations and for consular sections that does include destroying passports and also controlled items like blank passports and blank visa foils.

Our staff did follow protocols when—during the time on the task force—the Sudan task force—we became aware of some of those cases of people whose documents had been destroyed, but they still wanted to evacuate.

We worked very closely with individuals to assist them as they tried to evacuate either on one of our convoys or crossing borders, and one of the things that we did during that time, too, is we were able to replicate the consular systems in Khartoum before the embassy shut down so that we could produce those documents once we were able to help Sudanese cross the border.

The CHAIRMAN. Why would we—I understand blank passports that are at an embassy for emergency procedures, replacements. I understand those being destroyed. Why would we destroy the passport of a foreign national who was working in our embassy?

Ms. BITTER. I am not aware of those cases, sir. I need to double check and make sure you—

The CHAIRMAN. Would you respond to the committee to those questions?

Ms. BITTER. Yes, of course.

The CHAIRMAN. I want to know how many passports were destroyed.

Ms. BITTER. Of course.

The CHAIRMAN. I want to know from what nationalities and I want to know did the U.S. embassy destroy the passports of Sudanese staff at our embassy as supposedly *The New York Times* reports. I think it is important to understand why—if those things happened, why they happened.

[EDITOR'S NOTE.—The requested information referred to above follows:]

U.S. embassies and consulates do not routinely hold or store the passports of Locally Employed (LE) staff; these reports are incorrect. Two passports of LE staff members were destroyed during the evacuation of Embassy Khartoum, as these individuals had applied for U.S. nonimmigrant visas and their passports were in the possession of the consular section while their applications were processed. The embassy has confirmed these LE staff members have safely evacuated Sudan.

In general, Department guidance for a drawdown of consular operations requires precautions to not leave behind any documents, materials, or information that could fall into the wrong hands and be misused. This would include personally identifiable information (PII) in consular sections such as passports and other documents identifying members of the public when they cannot be easily and safely returned to the owner and which could create harm if stolen. The standard operating procedure for drawing down a consular section during a crisis is outlined in 7 FAH-1 H-293. This and other sections of the Consular Management Handbook instructs consular sections to transfer or destroy any items containing personal identifying information.

The U.S. Embassy in Khartoum had passports of Sudanese and third-country nationals who were in the process of applying for visas, and passports of U.S. citizens seeking consular services. While U.S. embassies in drawdown make every effort to return PII items where possible, the urgent security environment in Sudan did not allow us to safely return those passports or transfer them to other locations. Therefore, the embassy followed Department guidance to destroy them rather than leave them behind unsecured. The embassy destroyed 49 U.S. passports, 42 Consular Reports of Birth Abroad, and approximately 190 valid Sudanese and third-country passports. The embassy also destroyed approximately 150 expired Sudanese and

third-country passports. The embassy and task force provided the biographical data of the 49 U.S. passports and 42 Consular Reports of Birth Abroad to the Bureau of Consular Affairs' Division of Passport Services so those records could be documented. Due to the security situation and time constraints, Embassy Khartoum was not able to record the biographical data of the destroyed Sudanese and third-country passports.

Lastly, the United States enjoys strong people-to-people ties with India. India is now part of the Quad. We are constantly engaging it in geostrategic interests that we have.

New Jersey is home to a great number of Indian Americans and their families. I appreciate and applaud the Department's heightened focus towards reducing wait times for first time B-1/B-2 applicants in India.

Despite that progress, this past year India continues to face the longest wait times globally with average wait times for an appointment for the first time, B-1/B-2 applicant ranging between 450 and 600 days.

Could you please speak to me as to why that is the case—

Ms. BITTER. Yes.

The CHAIRMAN. —why it takes up to 600 days for an adjudication?

Ms. BITTER. Sure. India is a place where we have historically had high demand for visas and there is just a tremendous amount of pent-up demand. It is one of the things about India that is—every post is unique, but they also had a really devastating bout with COVID-19 quite late and so that their ability to—the pent-up demand lasted quite a bit longer.

We have surged staff there and when we did, we reduced wait times by about two-thirds. We have opened appointments for Indian nationals—dedicated appointments—in other posts for specific appointments and in all other categories—I am sure you are aware of this and you have mentioned it—wait times are prepandemic levels or better.

We will adjudicate 1 million visas in India this year. Our productivity there is extraordinarily high. I think—I do not—I probably should not say this on the record, but I think we are at maybe even 57 percent above where we were for prepandemic.

We are—the staff there is incredible and working enormously hard, acutely aware of these challenges and working very, very hard to address them.

The CHAIRMAN. I appreciate that. All I am saying is if we have a country that we are now including in the Quad, that we are in the midst of talking about creating a strategic pipeline through and all of these other things, that we are weaning off of Russian military equipment, all in a goal as we meet the China challenge to be a more significant player with us, part of that overall equation is making sure that we can adjudicate more actively, more aggressively.

I appreciate the size of the challenge, but it is also the size of the country.

Ms. BITTER. Right.

The CHAIRMAN. It is because of that and other reasons that we have decided to make it a significant partner. I hope we can find ways to further adjudicate and reduce that 600 days waiting time.

Ms. BITTER. The reasons that you articulated are the exact reasons we have prioritized this and sent surge teams and others. I take your point. We are working very hard on it. Thank you for raising it.

The CHAIRMAN. All right. We are going to send you that letter I referred to—the questions. I look forward to your response. The purpose of the letter is really to be helpful to you. I hope you will answer it in that spirit.

Let me thank you for appearing before the committee today. The record for the hearing will remain open until close of business on Friday, June 9. Please ensure that questions for the record are submitted no later than that date.

With that, this hearing is adjourned. Thank you.
[Whereupon, at 11:47 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

RESPONSES OF MS. RENA BITTER TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JEANNE SHAHEEN

Question. Background: As the situation in Afghanistan has evolved, especially since August 2021, the guidelines for eligibility and processing visas have changed. My casework staff have noticed conflicting guidance or responses to inquiries that do not reflect policy changes.

How is updated guidance communicated to the National Visa Center (NVC) staff who process visas and who liaise with applicants and Congress?

Answer. The National Visa Center (NVC) is part of the Visa Office in the Bureau of Consular Affairs. As such, NVC maintains close and regular communications with Visa Office headquarters, interagency partners, and U.S. Embassies and Consulates abroad to ensure NVC public and congressional communications and processing align with U.S. Government policies and priorities.

Question. Are there ways in which the NVC could improve communication with SIV applicants, who often do not have any insight into the process or where their application sits in the Chief of Mission (COM)-review queue?

Answer. The Department tracks and publishes quarterly reports reflecting the average processing time for each step in the SIV application process, including the COM review stage. Our Visa Office staff, including those at the National Visa Center (NVC), regularly update SIV-related information on *Travel.State.gov* to ensure its accuracy. We also conduct outreach to attorney groups, NGOs, and Congressional staff. Processing times vary on a case-by-case basis, and applicants may also contact NVC directly for an update on the status of their case.

Question. How does the Visa Center guarantee that all SIV applicant emails are read and responded to in a timely manner?

Answer. The work performed by contract staff at the National Visa Center is monitored in accordance with contract requirements on timeliness and accuracy. Contract staff follow standard operating procedures and escalation procedures for addressing complex cases.

Question. Has the Department considered implementing an SIV applicant portal similar to the Consular Electronic Application Center (CEAC) to help streamline document submissions and processing?

Answer. We have undertaken substantial efforts to streamline the Afghan SIV application and adjudication process. On January 3, 2023, the National Visa Center (NVC) eliminated its visa pre-processing backlog and has been maintaining a processing time of less than 10 business days for pre-COM inquiries and the review of document submissions in the visa processing stages of SIV processing. The Department processed 63 percent more COM approval applications in Q2 of FY 2023 than in the prior quarter.

Question. As we emerge from the pandemic, growth in the travel and tourism sector is critical to our economic recovery. However, visa wait times continue to limit our nation's ability to be globally competitive in the travel and tourism market. I

appreciate the work that the State Department has done and flexibility in addressing the needs of the travel and tourism community. I am concerned that delays in processing visas have failed to meet the current demand:

When does the State Department expect visa interview wait times for first time applicants from top inbound markets to drop below 30 days?

Answer. Today, more people than ever before can travel to the United States. Of the top 20 inbound visitor nationalities, just eight require a U.S. tourist visa. In the first 5 months of FY 2023, the U.S. Missions in those countries together issued 23 percent more visitor (B1/B2) visas and border crossing cards than during the same period in FY 2019. The median wait time for first time visitor visa interview is around 2 months. In all other categories, processing times are at pre-pandemic levels or better. Our goal is wait times of less than 120 days at more than 90 percent of posts by early 2024.

Question. LDRM is the contracting company providing staff for the NVC, but my office has received many complaints from those staff about LDRM's execution of its contract with State.

How does Consular Affairs measure the success of a contracting company, and does anyone within your Bureau speak to contractor staff about any concerns they may have? What is the Department of State's role in overseeing the contract?

Answer. On all contracts, Consular Affairs works with the Bureau of Administration via the Contractor Performance Assessment Reporting System. If work is unsatisfactory, the Bureau of Administration can take several actions to monitor improvement of the contractor. The Bureau of Administration gives the contractor specifics of what is to be performed, and the time frame in which to perform it. If no improvement is shown at the end of that time, the Bureau of Administration can terminate the contract.

Question. Background: Like many, my office has seen an increased volume of passport cases recently. My staff have also noticed an increase in delayed passport applications filed online.

Can you address what happened to online passport applications filed during this period? Has CA seen any other issues with online passport applications?

Answer. The Department of State plans to re-launch the Online Passport Renewal (OPR) program by the end of 2023. More than 565,000 Americans applied for and received passports using OPR during our public pilot from August 2022 to February 2023. We took the pilot offline when volumes increased in order to consolidate lessons learned before relaunch.

Question. The State Department plans to fully launch its online renewal platform later this year. What is the Department doing to ensure similar issues do not occur in the future?

Answer. During the pilot of Online Passport Renewal, we captured customer and internal user feedback. This feedback, tied with our evaluation of system performance, is informing our transition to a new hosting platform. We are working closely with application developers, user-interface experts, and government partners to enhance our product. We are addressing specific customer pain points such as photo upload and application status information.

Question. CA to draft: My office receives many cases where an acceptance agent, such as at the U.S. Post office, provides an applicant with incorrect guidance regarding wait times for an appointment, promising a Congressional office will get them an appointment or even advising against submitting an application:

How does State and Consular Affairs coordinate with the U.S. Postal Service to communicate policy guidance to acceptance agents?

Answer. It is not our policy to refer customers to Congressional offices. Acceptance agents advise applicants of current processing times. We would welcome additional information regarding the specific cases and the opportunity to correct any misunderstanding of our guidance.

Question. Background: Americans experiencing issues with their passport applications are instructed to call the National Passport Information Center (NPIC). Many constituents report long wait times, dropped calls, poor service and sometimes incorrect guidance:

What is the Administration doing to improve service at the NPIC and cut down wait times?

Answer. NPIC handled 3.76 million customer inquiries year-to-date, compared to 3.07 million for the same timeframe last year. To address this spike in demand, NPIC tripled the number of phone lines and customer service representatives, ex-

panded operating hours to include weekends, and opened a third facility. A Callback Assist feature now allows customers to receive a phone call when it is their turn for assistance, eliminating the need to wait. We work closely with the contractor to ensure that all operators are familiar with our policies and offering correct guidance to customers.

Question. How does the Department communicate guidance to the NPIC?

Answer. Passport Services' Customer Service team employs full-time liaisons who work on-site at two of NPIC's call centers. They provide Consular Affairs with real-time updates regarding systems, staffing and performance challenges while simultaneously informing NPIC of any changes to policy and procedures both in writing and in-person during both weekly and ad hoc meetings. We also review and approve all substantive changes to the knowledgebase articles that NPIC's Customer Service Representatives consult when talking with customers.

Question. Is the State Department creating other channels to book in-person appointments, such as through a website?

Answer. The Department of State plans to relaunch our online scheduling system this summer.

RESPONSES OF MS. RENA BITTER TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR MARCO RUBIO

Question. During the pandemic, the State Department significantly expanded telework eligibility for Civil Service and Foreign Service employees. However, the COVID-19 public health emergency has formally ended. It is time to bring back these employees into their respective offices, embassies, and consulates to properly provide services for the American people and conduct in-person diplomacy. U.S. Passport adjudication backlogs cannot be completed from an employee's dining room table and should most certainly not be conducted via a video conference on a boat in the Caribbean. What is the current backlog of U.S. Passport applications?

Answer. Our public facing staff are required to work in-person. Passport agency and counter staff have been in the office since June 2020.

Question. Are all Consular Affairs employees physically working in the office daily to clear this backlog?

Answer. Our passport agency and center staff, who have been working full-time in the office since June 2020, have worked hundreds of thousands of in-person overtime in order to meet demand and respond to Congressional constituent inquiries.

Question. If there are still Consular Affairs employees teleworking from home, how are they able to conduct their work given they must review Personally Identifiable Information (PII) and data of American applicants during application reviews?

Answer. Passport agency and center staff have been working full time in the office since June 2020. They are not permitted to physically remove applications and supporting documents from their workplace.

Question. Does the State Department authorize employees to take home the PII of applicants?

Answer. Passport employees are not permitted to physically remove applications and supporting documents from their workplace. Consular Affairs has strict policies and procedures in place to safeguard Americans' PII.

Question. Will you assure Americans that Consular Affairs employees working from home have not exposed Americans' PII and data to unauthorized personnel?

Answer. Passport agency and center staff have been working full time in the office since June 2020. Consular Affairs has strict policies and procedures in place to safeguard Americans' PII.

Question. Would you agree that the processing of passports is a core function of Consular Affairs?

Answer. Yes.

Question. Is it acceptable for the passport application process for a new passport to take more than 5 months?

Answer. The Department is committed to providing timely, accurate, secure passport products to U.S. citizens using all the tools at its disposal. Current routine passport processing time is 10-13 weeks.

Question. Is the Department planning to open any additional domestic passport agencies given the substantial current and future workloads? If so, where?

Answer. As outlined in the Department's Report on Ensuring Geographic Diversity and Accessibility of Passport Agencies, while the Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) strives to maximize accessibility and timely service delivery, physical agencies represent the costliest and least efficient service method for U.S. travelers. Building, equipping, and staffing new agencies takes a considerable amount of time, and the resulting benefits would be limited to the few customers in the agency's vicinity. To improve services nationwide for all customers, we are focusing on using our resources to modernize the passport experience.

Question. The Biden administration has issued a President's Management Agenda which lists one of the priorities as improving the service design and customer-experience by reducing customer burden and streamlining processes for citizens interacting with the U.S. Government. Using the passport processing crisis as an example—current passport processing times are at an all-time high and private U.S. industry has developed technologies, processes, and procedures to ensure the efficient submission of passport applications to the Department of State. Yet, the Department of State is spending taxpayer dollars to develop an online passport processing system, which was piloted from August 2022 to February 2023 and ignored the immediate efficiencies which can be leveraged with private U.S. industry. What is the status of the State Department's online passport application and renewal programs?

Answer. The Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) is working with several private U.S. companies on the design and implementation of the online passport renewal service. The pilot of the Online Passport Renewal (OPR) system enabled customers to submit an online application, upload a photograph, and make an electronic payment, all at their convenience, instead of completing paper documents and mailing an application package. Lessons learned from the pilot are being incorporated in the next version of OPR. CA is measuring the burden reductions this modernized system will provide to U.S. applicants.

Question. What were the greatest challenges identified by the pilot programs for online passport renewal technology test?

Answer. As the volume of applications in the Online Passport Renewal (OPR) application surged, specific points in the processing workflows and technical architecture did not scale sufficiently. The next version of OPR will move to a more flexible cloud platform to accommodate fluctuating volumes and work to optimize integrations with our legacy systems. CA is also improving backend services, such as our integrations with passport printing and archival systems, to simplify current processes and reduce pain points.

Question. Did Consular Affairs approach private U.S. companies when developing the pilot program regarding best practices?

Answer. The Online Passport Renewal system was developed by several private U.S. companies who worked collaboratively under contract with the Bureau of Consular Affairs. The Bureau also consulted with other governments that have implemented online passport systems.

Question. Did Consular Affairs see an increase or a reduction in the rate of denial or suspended renewal applications for those submitted via the online pilot programs as compared to the standard renewal process (excluding renewals received via the "Hand-Carry Unlimited Adult Renewal Lockbox program)?

Answer. During the Online Passport Renewal (OPR) pilot, Consular Affairs saw no meaningful distinction between the rates of suspension or of denial for OPR versus paper applications. We are using lessons learned from the pilot to update the photo quality tool to limit unacceptable photographs, which was the most common reason for suspension.

Question. When does the Department plan to re-offer the online passport renewal system?

Answer. The Department is targeting the end of calendar year 2023 to launch the new version of Online Passport Renew.

Question. International visitors to the U.S. are vital to the U.S. economy, with some estimates forecasting the U.S. will lose \$12 billion in 2023 due to international travelers being unable to obtain a visitor visa in time to travel to the U.S. To ensure visa issuance integrity, deter fraud, mitigate human trafficking, and protect the homeland, how many Consular Sections overseas have integrated Assistant Regional Security Officer-Investigators (ARSO-I) into their operations?

Answer. As of June 2023, there are 133 Diplomatic Security agent positions assigned to this program at 117 posts in 83 countries.

Question. How many Consular Sections do not have an ARSO–I assigned to them?

Answer. As of May 24, the number of Consular Sections whose status is open for emergency and/or routine consular services is 225. Of those, 108 do not have an ARSO–I assigned.

Question. Does Consular Affairs plan to expand the ARSO–I program in the future?

Answer. The Overseas Criminal Investigations Program, formerly known as the ARSO–I program, is jointly managed by CA's Office of Fraud Prevention Programs (CA/FPP) and Diplomatic Security's Office of Overseas Criminal Investigations (DS/OCI). CA/FPP and DS/OCI collaborate in evaluating the efficacy of current programs and gauging the potential for success of a new program at a post.

RESPONSES OF MS. RENA BITTER TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR TIM KAINE

Status of Recommendations from OIG Report: The Department's Office of the Inspector General's most recent semi-annual report to Congress released in May shows that six recommendations from the [November] 2021 report, *Review of the Bureau of Consular Affairs' ConsularOne Modernization Program-Significant Deployment Delays Continue*, continue to remain open. This program has faced significant delays and cost overruns.

Please provide an update on the status and timeline for resolution for each of the open recommendations:

Question. Recommendation 2: The Bureau of Consular Affairs should clearly define the ConsularOne modernization program and Consular Systems Modernization, including its components, projects, supporting contracts, and the associated total cost of those contracts for both efforts.

Answer. On January 24, 2023, the OIG recognized the progress made by the Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) towards implementing Recommendation 2 and notified the Department that the recommendation would be closed pending receipt of a signed memo from the CA Assistant Secretary approving the new definition of Consular Systems Modernization (CSM). CA provided the signed memo to the OIG on April 20, 2023.

Question. Recommendation 4: The Bureau of Consular Affairs should require the Office of Consular Systems and Technology to implement an internal communication and collaboration plan.

Answer. On January 24, 2023, the OIG recognized the progress made by the Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) towards implementing Recommendation 4 and notified the Department that the recommendation would be considered for closure pending receipt of a cleared communication plan. CA provided a cleared communication plan on April 28 and committed to routinely evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the plan to determine if updates are needed.

Question. Recommendation 6: The Bureau of Consular Affairs should require the Office of Consular Systems and Technology to maintain documented management approvals for all information systems throughout the systems development lifecycle process in accordance with Department standards.

Answer. On January 24, 2023, the OIG recognized the progress made by the Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) towards implementing Recommendation 6 and notified the Department that further clarification was required on who approved work plans associated with the systems development lifecycle process outlined by CA in an earlier response. CA provided the OIG the requested documentation on April 28.

Question. Recommendation 8: The Bureau of Consular Affairs should require the Office of Consular Systems and Technology to conduct independent information system security assessments.

Answer. On January 24, 2023, the OIG recognized the progress made by the Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) towards implementing Recommendation 8 and sought clarification on who will conduct independent information system assessments for CA. On April 28, 2023, CA notified the OIG that the Information Resources Management (IRM) Bureau is exploring an enterprise-wide contract that could satisfy this requirement and is committed to working with CA on a contract solution sepa-

rate from the vehicle that aids in the selection and implementation of security controls.

Question. Recommendation 10: The Bureau of Consular Affairs, in coordination with the Bureau of Information Resource Management, should complete the assessment and authorization process for the Office of Consular Systems and Technology's information systems with expired authorizations to operate.

Answer. On January 24, 2023, the OIG recognized the progress made by the Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) towards implementing Recommendation 10 and notified the Department that the recommendation would be considered closed once CA provided copies of approved Authorizations to Operate (ATO) for all CA systems. CA notified the OIG on April 28 that the number of expired ATOs had been reduced to 10 as of April 19. The total number of expired ATOs has been reduced to three as of June 9. CA continues to make progress toward closing this recommendation.

Question. Recommendation 11: The Bureau of Consular Affairs should perform annual security controls assessments for the Office of Consular Systems and Technology's information systems in accordance with Department standards.

Answer. On January 24, 2023, the OIG recognized the progress made by the Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) towards implementing Recommendation 11. CA continues to make steady progress in completing Annual Controls Assessments (ACAs), completing five in 2023 thus far. CA continues to work through remaining ACAs, prioritizing High Systems and Moderate Non-Cloud Systems. CA has requested additional personnel and resources to meet competing priority mandates.

RESPONSES OF MS. RENA BITTER TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR TODD YOUNG

Question. With the coming increase in nonimmigrant visa fees, can you please expand on how the Department plans to monitor and analyze the effects of these adjustments on visa application rates and patterns?

Answer. The Bureau of Consular Affairs tracks data on visa adjudication volumes. While we do not anticipate any impact on visa applications due to implementation of the new fees, we will continue tracking visa application data and analyze any trends to determine possible connections to the fee increases.

Question. Beyond requesting expenditure authorities, what strategies does your bureau have in place to create more sustainable fee structures to avoid future shortfalls like we saw during the pandemic?

Answer. The Bureau of Consular Affairs' (CA) "fee structures" are governed by the general and specific legislative authorities that exist for each fee. CA does not have the authority to set any of its fees above cost, and it also lacks the authority to retain and spend certain fees. As a result, without adjustments in authorities it is difficult to create sustainable structures that would avoid shortfalls resulting from significant declines in demand. The current expanded expenditure authorities granted by Congress are critical, because they afford consular operations the flexibility to balance spending.

Question. What ongoing efforts are being undertaken to modernize the visa application system or introduce automation to streamline the process?

Answer. Bureau of Consular Affairs' (CA) innovations to modernize include improvements to interview waiver processes, while maintaining national security, applicant scheduling, applicant correspondence, and internal processing. CA is using technology tools to increase efficiencies across the full range of consular operations. CA is also developing a roadmap for extensive modernization of visa-related systems. Current initiatives include paperless (digital) visas, domestic revalidation of work visas, and faster and more secure applicant screening through the National Vetting Center.

Question. How does the State Department determine resource allocation and staffing levels for consular offices to handle nonimmigrant visa applications?

Answer. Data analysts in the Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) use historical and current nonimmigrant visa (NIV) data to create staffing projection tools which estimate the levels of demand that a given post will likely encounter over the next several years. CA updates the data in those projection tools annually. In addition to the data analysis, CA receives yearly inputs directly from posts to finely tune NIV demand estimates. From those estimates, CA determines how many adjudicators a given post will need to meet projected demand.

Question. How does State work with DHS to speed up processing of pending immigrant visa petitions?

Answer. The Department collaborates with DHS on digitization efforts. Since 2020, DHS has digitally transferred family-based immigrant visa (IV) petitions for beneficiaries abroad to the Department for processing, eliminating the need for manual data entry or mailed paper petitions. The Department and DHS are working to modernize other petition types. The Department's National Visa Center has eliminated its processing backlogs, and most overseas consular sections have little to no backlog for IV appointments.

Question. When does the State Department plan to re-launch its Online Passport Renewal program?

Answer. The State Department plans to re-launch the Online Passport Renewal program by the end of 2023. We received more than 500,000 applications during our public pilot from August 2022 to February 2023. We are incorporating customer feedback and lessons learned to update OPR for an expected public release.

RESPONSES OF MS. RENA BITTER TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR BILL HAGERTY

Question. Registered Nurse Visa Backlog: According to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, the Registered Nurse workforce is expected to require nearly 200,000 additional full-time employees over the next decade while projecting as many retirements per year over the same period. Many organizations have raised awareness around the nursing workforce crisis taking place in the U.S.

The Tennessee Hospital Association partnered with a firm that produces workforce reports for the Department of Health and Human Services to determine the workforce shortages in my state. Tennessee currently has a nursing shortage of nearly 16,000 full-time employees which is preventing patients in my state from receiving care to the fullest extent in some cases. Our sites of care are not able to adequately treat the demand of patients because our hospitals cannot staff all beds in our facilities, long-term care and skilled nursing facilities cannot accept post-acute care patients after their hospital stays because of workforce shortages, and the health care workforce shortages have caused wage inflation that is not financially sustainable to our health care providers.

The Deans and Directors of post-secondary institutions in Tennessee have reported that enrollment has decreased for health professions over the past decade while the retirement age of Tennesseans will increase by 75 percent over the next decade. There will be a shortage in health care workforce supply that won't be able to meet the demand of health care needed by an aging population in Tennessee.

International workers who obtain EB-3 Visas contribute to meeting the needs of patients and healthcare facilities in my state. Currently, the process for employers is extensive, cumbersome, and prolonged.

Assistant Secretary Bitter: What opportunities exist to streamline this process? And will you agree to work with my office on examining these suggestions?

Answer. We have issued 96 percent more EB-3 visas to date this fiscal year than we did during the same period in pre-pandemic FY 2019. As required by law, the process starts with the Department of Labor, proceeds to USCIS, and then comes to the Department of State. We have ongoing efforts to modernize the transfer of approved petitions from USCIS to our National Visa Center. The combined total number of EB-3 visas used annually by the Department, and by USCIS for domestic adjustments, is capped by statute. I welcome the opportunity to engage with you and your office.

Question. PERM Labor Certification: Is there a way to centralize the PERM Labor Certification per state or per industry when a staffing crisis is at hand rather than the process being per employer?

Answer. I respectfully refer you to the Department of Labor, which has authority over labor certification.

Question. What portions of this step can be eliminated or streamlined to shorten the processing time?

Answer. I respectfully refer you to the Department of Labor, which has authority over labor certification.

Question. Priority Dates: What can the Administration do to decrease wait times so that Priority Dates are expedited after a Form I-140 immigrant petition is submitted for those entering a health profession?

Answer. The total number of EB-3 visas used by USCIS and the Department combined is capped by statute. Demand for EB-3 visas remains high, and to keep visa use within the maximum allowed under the FY 2023 annual limit, EB-3 final action dates were established in May 2023. EB-3 applicants with priority dates before the final action date have a visa available. The Department continues to monitor the situation and make adjustments as necessary. However, we cannot exceed the statutory annual limit.

Question. Interviews for Immigrant Visas: Can interviews for immigrant visas be scheduled adjacent to the above steps to minimize processing time?

Answer. A petition must be approved by USCIS before it is sent to the Department for immigrant visa processing. The beneficiary must then submit all required documents for visa processing, and these documents are reviewed by a consular officer. Scheduling immigrant visa appointments after a beneficiary has an approved petition, has a visa available, and has submitted required documents ensures the visa can be issued more quickly.

Question. Can these interviews be expedited for health professions?

Answer. We continue to be in close contact with our high-volume EB-3 processing posts, such as Manila, to ensure they are prioritizing the processing of EB-3 cases. Our ability to prioritize visa interviews for nurses is limited to the number of EB-3 visas available in any given year, a number that is capped by statute.

Question. If so, what would the Department of State require from the Department of Labor to support this determination?

Answer. The Department of State does not require action by the Department of Labor to increase the throughput of EB-3 visas. The Department of State has issued 96 percent more EB-3 visas to date this fiscal year than we did during the same period in pre-pandemic FY 2019. In order for us to issue more EB-3 visas, Congress would need to raise the statutory annual cap on this visa category.

RESPONSES OF MS. RENA BITTER TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR TAMMY DUCKWORTH

Question. Background: Due to sanctions, American air carriers currently avoid transiting Russian airspace, which makes their flights to certain destinations longer and more expensive. As a result, some Americans choose to fly on foreign carriers that do not avoid Russian airspace. However, Americans may not be aware that there is a risk when flying a foreign carrier who may transit Russian airspace.

In an illustrative example, on June 7, a San Francisco-bound Air India flight was forced to land in eastern Russia due to an engine issue. Getting stuck in Russia poses political and logistical challenges. Politically, we have seen Russia unfairly jail Americans and use them as bargaining chips in bilateral negotiations. Logistically, the imposition of sanctions means it is difficult to get airplane parts and mechanics into Russia to fix whatever mechanical issue may have required the unscheduled landing. This means that what would be a brief travel pause in other contexts could extend into a much longer delay, with greater inconvenience. This is ultimately a safety issue for American travelers.

What was the State Department's role in assisting the dozens of American citizens aboard the Air India flight—both to ensure their short-term welfare while in Russia, but also their ability to get back to the United States?

Answer. The Department closely monitored Air India's emergency landing in Magadan, Russia on June 6. The Department obtained a passenger manifest listing U.S. citizen passengers. No U.S. citizens, family members, or congressional representatives requested consular assistance. The Air India aircraft was replaced within 48 hours and passengers made their onward travel to San Francisco.

Question. What action, if any, is the State Department taking to ensure American travelers understand the risk they face by boarding a foreign carrier's flight whose route crosses through Russian airspace? Likewise, is the State Department coordinating with any other federal agencies in pursuit of this goal?

Answer. The Department closely tracks third country air carrier overflights of Russia on routes to and from the United States with interagency colleagues to identify potential responses consistent with domestic and international legal obligations. The travel advisory for Russia remains at a Level 4, DO NOT TRAVEL and notes that U.S. Embassy personnel are generally not permitted to travel on Russian air carriers. The Department believes foreign carriers that overfly Russia should notify prospective passengers of any potential risks.

RESPONSES OF MS. RENA BITTER TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR TIM SCOTT

Question. Background: The Bureau of Consular Affairs is facing a significant backlog of nonimmigrant visa applications at various posts around the world. I have been told that the average wait times for first-time visitor visas from top inbound markets is 400+ days.

To address this backlog, I understand that consular officers are required to process an arbitrary figure of 120 nonimmigrant visa interviews per day—which nets to an average of 3.5 minutes per interview, based on an 8-hour workday with a 1-hour break.

While I believe more should be done to address the current backlog—especially as the American travel industry faces a potential loss of \$7 billion this year—I also believe that national security should remain *the top priority* for consular officers as they consider nonimmigrant visa applications.

Can you confirm that this figure adequately reflects the expectations set for consular officers? If so, how was this figure determined?

Answer. National security is our highest priority when adjudicating U.S. visa applications. To ensure that consular adjudicators take sufficient time to thoroughly vet each visa application, the Department instructs posts to schedule no more than 120 nonimmigrant visa interviews per consular adjudicator per day. This is only a guideline for posts, which determine their interviewing capacity based on local conditions.

Question. Do you believe that 3.5 minutes per interview is enough time for consular officers to adequately screen nonimmigrant visa applicants for national security risks?

Answer. National security is our top priority when adjudicating visa applications. Consular officers are trained to examine all available information—including from consular and interagency databases, the visa application, and the applicant's statements—to make an informed decision about whether the person is eligible for the visa. In addition to the interview, every visa applicant undergoes extensive security screening which draws on information from the full range of U.S. Government agencies, including thorough screening against U.S. law enforcement and counterterrorism databases.

Question. What additional steps is the Bureau taking to address the outstanding backlog of nonimmigrant visa applications?

Answer. Long wait times for interviews apply only to first-time tourist visa applicants—a very small percentage of entries to the United States. In all other categories important to the U.S. economy—students, temporary workers, repeat travelers, and maritime crew—wait times are at pre-pandemic levels or lower.

Question. Background: In your testimony, you characterized the recent evacuation of 2,000 American citizens and their family members from Sudan as a “very successful multinational effort under the most difficult circumstances.”

I understand that evacuating citizens and personnel in a time of crisis is an incredibly risky and complicated endeavor. However, I cannot say I agree with your assessment that our efforts in Khartoum were “very successful,” especially when compared to the ability of other countries to safely evacuate their citizens by air days before the Department began to assist American citizens with an over-land evacuation:

Most analysts believe the recent outbreak of hostilities in Sudan was expected and easily predicted. If so, what efforts did the Bureau of Consular Affairs take to coordinate with other bureaus in the Department to plan for an effective response for U.S. citizens before the violence erupted?

Answer. The Department of State's Travel Advisory for Sudan was assessed at Level 4, the highest level, and advised U.S. citizens *Do Not Travel to Sudan* since August 2021. Consular messaging further advised U.S. citizens to have contingency plans to depart Sudan that did not rely on U.S. Government assistance. Every post, including Embassy Khartoum, has evacuation plans and regularly performs drills and exercises on crisis scenarios that include assistance to U.S. citizens.

Question. The highest priority for the Bureau of Consular Affairs, as stated by the Department, is “to protect the lives and serve the interests of U.S. citizens abroad.” Does the Bureau have adequate contingency plans in place to fulfil this mission in the event of a crisis at high-risk posts around the world, particularly in Africa?

Answer. Crisis planning is an interagency priority and the Bureau of Consular Affairs works across the Department and interagency to plan for contingencies involv-

ing private U.S. citizens. Our top priority is providing timely and accurate information about conditions and changing circumstances so Americans can make informed decisions about their safety and security. During a crisis, our assistance may include documenting citizens and family members for travel, assisting people in arranging for commercial departure, issuing repatriation loans, or arranging noncommercial options to evacuate U.S. citizens.

Question. As the 2023 summer travel season begins, Americans still face incredibly long wait times for passport processing—systemic delays that began 3 years ago at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On May 31, I joined my South Carolina delegation colleagues in pinning a letter to Secretary Blinken expressing concern over this backlog and a desire to see the Charleston Passport Center offer in-person passport application appointments, to help reduce the burden on other regional passport centers.

In the letter, we highlighted report language that was included in the FY23 State and Foreign Operations Appropriations bill that required the Department to consult with Congress on the need for in-person constituent appointments at the Charleston Passport Center.

To my knowledge, member-level consultations with the Senate Appropriations Committee have yet to occur and the Department has yet to provide a plan to address the need for in-person services in Charleston:

Please provide an update on what steps the Bureau of Consular Affairs is taking to address this issue.

Answer. The Charleston Passport Agency is located on the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center government compound, home to eight Department of State facilities and additional buildings used by other federal agencies. It is not accessible to the public. Ninety-four percent of applicants renew their passports by mail or visit one of the over 7,400 acceptance facilities, including the 20 facilities located within 60 miles of Charleston. I believe that modernizing and streamlining the passport process provides greater benefit to the traveling public and would welcome the opportunity to provide a member-level consultation.

