

Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Senator Richard G. Lugar
Opening Statement for
Hearing on Passport Operations
June 19, 2007

I join in welcoming Assistant Secretary Harty to the Committee. I am hopeful that our inquiry today will illuminate the problems experienced by many Americans who are attempting to secure their passports for important travel. Congress should be working closely with the State Department to reduce processing times, improve information for passport customers, and ensure that emergency cases are addressed.

With a change in law occurring on January 23, 2007, thousands of Americans followed new rules and sought a passport for travel in the Western Hemisphere. However, their honest efforts ran into a bureaucratic system unable to handle the vastly increased demand. In many cases, processing times tripled from past years. This has led to a wave of desperate travelers appealing to Congressional offices for help in salvaging vacations, business trips, and other travel.

Passport inquiries are now the number one casework concern in my Indiana offices by a wide margin. I anticipate that this is true for most Senate offices. In recent months, I increased the number of staffers dealing with passports from one to seven and instituted e-mail and website features to help process requests and disseminate information.

Although inquiries by my office to Passport Agency personnel and contractors have been treated courteously and pleasantly, the information provided to constituents and my staff was often erroneous or unhelpful. Constituents have been told that their passports were on the way only to find out days later that no meaningful progress had been made towards processing them. Other constituents reported that regardless of what time of day they called the Passport Agency, they were unable to connect with agency personnel about their application. The passport office in New Orleans, to which Indiana passport applications are sent, clearly is inadequately staffed.

As a last-ditch option, my staff has guided Hoosiers who were set to depart within 48 hours to the Chicago Passport Agency. There, after a long drive, they could undertake the burdensome task of waiting in a line that stretched around the building, working their way through security, and then reapplying for their passport. For constituents who were not born in Indiana, or even the United States, and who had already sent in their only birth certificate with their original application, this option proved especially difficult. Some constituents were forced to pay the passport application fee a second time when they appeared in Chicago. Enduring this process, just hours before an overseas departure caused enormous anxiety for countless travelers.

On June 6, I wrote to Secretary Rice to share the passport experiences of Hoosiers and appeal for urgent efforts to fix the system. I appreciate the Administration's decision on June 8 to allow U.S. citizens traveling to Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Bermuda to enter and depart from the United States by air with a government issued photo identification and proof of application for a passport. This temporary fix lasts through September 30, 2007.

In my letter to Secretary Rice, I indicated that the State Department should not be reticent to ask Congress for whatever additional resources are necessary to make the passport process run smoothly. We want a first class passport system that meets our security needs while facilitating the travel of Americans. This travel is essential to our foreign policy, our economy, and the cultural and educational life of our citizens.

I thank the Chairman and look forward to our discussion.

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