

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

June 22, 2007

The Honorable Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Rice,

We are writing to you about a crisis that has developed in our Congressional Districts as well as around the country with regard to passports.

Our offices have been inundated with constituents desperately attempting to obtain passports before their travel dates, despite having applied well in advance. While the San Francisco and Los Angeles Passport Agencies have been absolutely phenomenal in assisting our staff and our constituents, there is an extraordinary need for systemic changes to address the issues that led up to this crisis and to prevent future ones.

We commend the State Department for the actions which have been taken thus far, such as hiring 170 more employees, drawing on existing and former employees for support, and opening a new passport center in Arkansas. It is welcome news that the Department will be hiring 400 additional staff this fiscal year. Because passport agency employees have literally worked around the clock, 1.66 million passports were issued in May.

However, what concerns us is that the State Department has had two years to plan for this "record demand" of passports which was inevitable, given the new rules. We're just now hearing about steps being taken to address the massive backlog. Only this month did the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security take steps to afford relief to the public by issuing an interim rule easing the restrictions under the Western Hemisphere Initiative. While being able to print out proof of one's passport application to travel is great if there is access to a computer, this does not help those without access. In 2007, asking Americans to use a receipt of their passport application as proof of their citizenship simply isn't good enough.

We need more passport processing centers across the country to meet the growing demand. We also need to study alternative ways for passport applications to be submitted to facilitate the process for customers. It is our understanding the State Department is already taking steps to further the potential use of a card for those families who cross the border multiple times a week, though for other travelers other options may need to be considered to improve efficiencies. An on-line renewal application may help Passport Agencies to better serve our constituents without sacrificing security or accuracy. As with other applications submitted on-line, this could relieve stress from the Agencies and help citizens get their passports in a timely manner. Using a model in our state of California, Driver's License renewals are currently submitted online for qualified drivers, as would be the case with "qualified travelers." Additionally, a detailed audit needs to be performed to review the employee-hiring process and the timeline on security checks to ensure that they are streamlined to meet the needs of the agency.

We agree with the Department's decision to approve refunds for those who have paid for expedited service but did not receive their passports in time as promised. We ask that this be facilitated as soon as possible in light of the inconvenience and anxiety experienced by passport applicants.

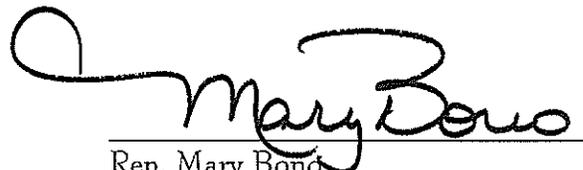
Passport Agencies are working hard to eliminate the backlog and process passports efficiently. California, with a large concentration of naturalized U.S. citizens, has been one of the regions hit hardest. The San Francisco Passport Agency, under Customer Service Manager Michael Silva's leadership, has been operating late into the night and through weekends to accommodate the growing number of emergency travelers, in addition to travelers who had applied early but have yet to receive their passports. The Agency's lunch room is completely full floor to ceiling with passport files from March applicants. Similarly, the Los Angeles Passport Agency, under the guidance of John Solberg, has been working overtime to handle the crush of applications. If not for the care and concern of Agency employees working nights and weekends, thousands of travelers would be forced to cancel their trips. The workload is compounded by the courier services which are approved by the Department. The Agencies are also very short-staffed in the fraud detection unit, as well as the unit that must respond in writing to passport applications that contain incorrect or insufficient information.

We're asking that you do everything in your power to address this crisis locally and nationally. We look forward to your timely response and underscore to you how much your leadership is needed to address what we believe is a 'perfect storm' impacting millions of Americans.

Sincerely,



Rep. Anna Eshoo
Member of Congress



Rep. Mary Bond
Member of Congress

The California Delegation

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Rep. MaryBono
Rep. Zoe Lofgren
Rep. Jim Costa
Rep. Adam Schiff
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