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Briefing with Deputy Assistant Secretary for Passport Services Rachel Arndt, Bureau of Consular Affairs On the State Department's Passport Services

SPECIAL BRIEFING

RACHEL ARNDT, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR PASSPORT SERVICES BUREAU OF
CONSULAR AFFAIRS

VIA TELECONFERENCE

JULY 14, 2021

MS PORTER: Good morning, everyone, and thank you for joining the State Department's press briefing on the status of our passport services. Joining us today is Deputy Assistant Secretary for Passport Services Rachel Arndt from the department's Bureau of Consular Affairs. Deputy Assistant Secretary Arndt oversees and directs the department's passports operations here in Washington, as well as its network of passport agencies and centers across the United States.

Today's briefing is on the record; however, the contents will be embargoed until the end of the call. Deputy Assistant Secretary Arndt will begin with a brief opening statement, and then we'll take your questions. With that, I'll hand it over to you, DAS Arndt.

MS ARNDT: Good morning. Thank you for joining us today. As noted, I'm here to talk to you about the status of the State Department's passport services. We as a department continue to recover from the effects of COVID-19 while we work to meet passport demand as U.S. citizens

increasingly seek to travel overseas again. The success of the U.S. Government's COVID-19 vaccination program means Americans will be able to get back to normal in many ways this summer. However, the pandemic's disruptions continue to have a ripple effect on all steps of the passport process, including the amount of time it currently takes us to process a passport application.

We are surging staff, both adjudicators and contractors, back into the office at agencies across the country as COVID restrictions ease. But it will take time for our wait times to fall from the current 12 to 18 weeks to pre-pandemic levels. This means people who submit new passport applications right now will not get their new passport until well into the fall. Last-minute passport appointments are extremely limited. U.S. citizens who wish to travel overseas this summer and do not currently have a passport may need to make alternate travel plans.

We also want to remind U.S. citizens many parts of the world are experiencing additional waves of COVID-19, and they may have their travel plans unexpectedly interrupted due to the health situation in their destination. We've been doing and continue to do everything we can to serve the American public while prioritizing the health and safety of our staff and of our customers.

As we bring more staff back into the office, we will continue to be as transparent as possible in updating the American public on how long it will take to get a passport.

With that, I will take your questions. Thank you.

OPERATOR: Once again, for questions press 1-0, please. You will hear acknowledgment that you've been placed in queue. Just listen for your name on the line.

MS PORTER: Let's go to Christina Ruffini.

QUESTION: Hi, good morning. I'm wondering, you said you're surging staff back into the office, and contractors. When you say that, is that pre-pandemic levels? Are you seeking to add more staff in order to deal with the backlog? And what is the process for someone who needs an emergency passport or absolutely has to travel? Is there any way to expedite, and what are the odds of that happening? Thank you.

MS ARNDT: Thank you, yes. We are ramping up our staffing, as noted. This summer we're going to have over 150 staff returning to 21 agencies across the country, and that will increase our

capacity to process applications more quickly. We are looking at surging back to pre-pandemic staffing levels and additional staff for both government and contractor staff.

The – as far as the second part of your question, for getting service right now, you can go online and make – get the application form for your passport and submit it by mail, if you're eligible. And if you have to travel urgently and still need the passport, we do have extremely limited appointments for customers who have urgent international travel in the next 72 hours, or three business days, for reasons other than life-and-death emergencies. So that, you would need to go online to our online appointment system to make an appointment, and that appointment would have to be within three business days of the international travel. One caveat is if you need a foreign visa for your travel, the date of your appointment can be within 10 business days of your international travel.

MS PORTER: Let's go to Nick Wadhams.

QUESTION: Hi. Sorry. Sorry, can you hear me?

MS PORTER: Yes, we can hear you.

QUESTION: Okay, thanks. Sorry, I missed it just at the beginning. You said the wait times will be 12 to 18 weeks? And then also, can you address the issue of staff who are working on visas for foreigners looking to come into the United States? Do you have any sense of when the travel restrictions or the – for foreigners from Schengen countries and other nations like India and Brazil will be lifted? Thanks.

MS ARNDT: Let me address the second part of your question by saying that visa services are certainly outside of my swim lane. However, I will say that COVID-19 has been a disruptive force across the globe, and I know that many of our operations are impacted by that.

As far as – to go back to the routine passport processing times, currently our wait time for both new and renewal routine passport applications can be up to 18 weeks, and that includes our processing time, the initial internal intake of the applications, and mailing. Customers can pay an additional \$60 to expedite their applications, and the wait times for the expedited applications are currently up to 12 weeks, and again, depending on the mailing time. We really encourage folks to apply for or renew their passport at least six months ahead of when you'll need one to avoid any of those last-minute problems.

I would also note that when checking your expiration date, folks should also check the dates of their children's passports as those are valid for only five years instead of the adults', which are 10 years, and we find that people run into some difficulties if they don't check their children's passports. Thank you.

MS PORTER: Let's go to Courtney McBride.

QUESTION: Thank you. We've heard from some travelers who have been unable to even get through on the renewal lines or the passport agency phone lines. They've cited long hold times followed by disconnections, and I'm wondering if your staffing surge also improves – includes improvements to those systems.

And then separately, the chairman and ranking member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee wrote to Secretary Blinken urging acceleration of processing and asking how Congress could potentially assist with resources or other steps, and I'm just wondering whether the department intends to respond by their Friday deadline. Thanks.

MS ARNDT: Yes, thank you. I am certain that we have received that letter and will respond promptly. As to the call center, we note that the majority of the callers are actually requesting information on the status of their pending applications, which you can find that online at **passportstatus.state.gov**. Representatives will not be able to provide the status updates by phone as they're prioritizing life-or-death emergency appointments and expedite service upgrades. So it may take weeks for that status to be available as we are processing and intaking applications.

The passport information center, or our call center, is experiencing just unprecedented call volumes for many of the same reasons that our wait times are increasing. So we are addressing this by bringing on more staff to answer calls, as local conditions permit, and then working with our contractor for the call center to increase their staffing levels, and they are doing this with some aggressive hiring also, so also trying to surge on the call center staffing. Thank you.

MS PORTER: Let's go to Lara Jakes.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks for doing the call. Obviously, you know there's huge interest in this issue. Two questions. One, what is the backlog, the current backlog of passports right now? I know you've mentioned the wait time, but how does that equate into actual applications that are sitting

and waiting? And then secondly, I was curious. You mentioned that parents should also be looking at their children's passports since they expire within a five-year period as opposed to a 10-year period. But as you know, children are required when they reapply to do it **in-person** – both parents need to be there. Quite an onerous process as opposed to just mailing it in, which is what you're recommending for adults to do. Has there been any consideration of waiving those **in-person** requirements or those two-parent requirements for children to allow them to renew their passports online as well? Thanks.

MS ARNDT: Thank you. Yes, our backlog currently is somewhere in the range of a million and a half to 2 million applications. That is somewhat higher than what we would normally expect to see. However, that was really because as the travelers were ramping up with the vaccinations availability, the workload started coming in faster than we had – we would normally see. And you're correct that we do require for the children's passports to – and all first-time applicants actually must apply in person. And when we say "apply in person," we can use a passport acceptance facility such as the post office, clerks of court, libraries, local government offices, and we do have information on **travel.state.gov** where people can locate the nearest location for that. And many of those facilities are also ramping back up their appointment availabilities similar to what we are doing. Thank you.

MODERATOR: Let's go to Conor Finnegan.

QUESTION: Hey, thanks for doing this. Can you say how many, if any, of the regional passport offices are fully reopened? And if some of them are in cities that are fully reopened otherwise in accordance with their local restrictions, why aren't these offices now fully reopened and fully restaffed so that they can take more appointments, more walk-in appointments, more emergency appointments? Thank you.

MS ARNDT: Yes, as of July 12th, we had passport agencies where staff was returning, all of the staff was returning in 16 – I'm sorry, 17 cities. We have an additional five that we are anticipating approval to move to be completely open with all staff back in the office. What we are doing with the limited appointments, and those are available, again, on a first-come, first-served basis, is we are trying to address all of our workflow streams, and that means we have the majority of our work comes in through the mail. It takes four to five times longer to assist a customer at a counter than in the back room looking at the documentation, so what we're doing to ensure that

we get through all of the applications as quickly as possible is to continue to focus on those that are pending that people have applied for in the past several months. Thank you.

MODERATOR: Let's go to Eric Katz.

QUESTION: Thank you. I wanted to ask, first of all, how important is it to have workers in person? There's **in-person** application process that you've gone over, but to what extent can sort of normal passport processing happen when the staff is working remotely? And secondly, when you talked about surging up offices, is there any actual new hiring taking place, or is this just returning employees who had been remote back to the office and adding contractors? I – just to add on to that – sorry – I know there was this – the department told the IG in 2019 that there was a critical shortage of passport specialists, so has that been addressed, and are you trying to add on to the that? Are you still trying to get back to sort of the normal level?

MS ARNDT: Yes. So our – actually, passport specialists need to be physically present in the office to process the passports. They are not processing remotely or from home. What we have for our issuance process, we require a connectivity to systems and databases that are currently only accessible from within our facilities. So we're trying to adjudicate on site to help us safeguard the customers' personally identifiable information and to ensure the integrity of the entire application process. So we're maintaining very high standards of security and privacy protection for the customers, and we're securing their sensitive documents like their birth certificates and naturalization certificates in our offices. And, of course, the physical printing and mailing of the passport books and cards occurs from our facility.

As to the hiring, we are doing dual-track, as you noted, bringing back additional folks who had been out of the office and we are also ramping up and surging to meet the higher demand levels. It does take some time to hire staff, but we – in the interim, we have – in addition to surging our staff for both contract and government, we are expanding our overtime work at all locations and we are continuing to increase the number of appointments available at all of our public passport agencies and centers. And then we are also working with our partners to expand staffing capacity at the front end for processing at our lockbox facilities where they open the mail and enter – data enter the information into the system so it's accessible to us. Thank you.

MS PORTER: Let's go to Michel Ghandour, please.

QUESTION: Thank you for doing the call. What about the U.S. citizens who are abroad and they need to renew their passports? Do they have to wait between 12 and 18 weeks too?

MS ARNDT: Yes, our embassies and consulates are currently providing emergency passport services and in some cases routine passport services to U.S. citizens overseas. That is dependent upon the particular location. So anyone who needs passport services abroad, the U.S. citizen should contact the U.S. embassy or consulate that's closest to them, and they can find information on the services and the operations available on each of the embassies' or consulates' webpage. And – that information is updated weekly. Thank you.

MS PORTER: Let's take our last question from Ted Daniel, please.

QUESTION: Hi, good morning. Is State aware that people are selling passport appointments online and is anything being done to stop that?

MS ARNDT: Yes, we are aware of the issues and we are working to prevent them. The Department of State does not charge a fee to solely book an emergency appointment at one of our agencies or centers, so if anyone receives a request for payment for scheduling a U.S. passport appointment, that should be considered fraudulent. You can go online and see the full schedule of passport fees, again, on travel.state.gov if anyone is interested in that.

And I'd also like to say that the department is not affiliated with any third-party appointment booking services, and we've seen numerous instances of falsified appointment bookings through these vendors. And unfortunately, we may not be able to honor appointments booked via third party, so we are aware and are working to try to rectify that situation. Thank you.

MS PORTER: It looks like we have Courtney McBride of *Wall Street Journal* back in the queue. Courtney, if you're with us, we'll actually take you as the last question.

QUESTION: Thank you so much. The department has attributed some of these extended turnaround times not just to staffing but to delays with the postal service, and for its part, USPS expressed some surprise when we talked to them about this estimate of six weeks' mailing time between the consumer and the processing facilities. I'm just wondering if you can explain how you arrived at that number and where the discrepancy might lie.

MS ARNDT: Thank you. Yes, we have – that part of the process is not something, obviously, that we can control. So what we are relying on that is the – some anecdotal evidence from when passport applicants have identified that they have submitted their application and when it is received at our processing or intake processing facility. And it's only when it's received at our processing facility that we can actually track it and then only when it's data entered that we will be able to provide a status update to the applicant on their passport.

MS PORTER: Thank you all for joining this morning's press briefing. That concludes the contents of the briefing. The embargo is now lifted. Have a wonderful rest of your day.

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