BORDER SECURITY

State Department Should Plan for Potentially Significant Staffing and Facilities Shortfalls Caused by Changes in the Visa Waiver Program

What GAO Found

The potential elimination or suspension of the Visa Waiver Program could cause dramatic increases in visa demand—from around 500,000 (the average number of people from VWP countries who obtain a U.S. visa each year) to as much as 12.6 million (the average number of people who travel to the United States from VWP countries each year)—that could overwhelm visa operations in the near term. To meet visa demand, State officials said they could need approximately 45 new facilities, which we estimate could cost $3.8 billion to $5.7 billion. We estimate State would also need substantially more staff—around 540 new Foreign Service officers at a cost of around $185 million to $201 million per year, and 1,350 local Foreign Service national staff at around $168 million to $190 million per year, as well as additional management and support positions for a total annual cost of $447 million to $486 million. Because VWP elimination would increase the number of travelers needing a visa, we estimate annual visa fee revenues would increase substantially, by $1.7 billion to $1.8 billion, and would offset the year-to-year recurring staffing costs. State has done limited planning for how it would address increased visa demand if the program were suspended or eliminated.

Adding countries to the Visa Waiver Program would reduce visa demand in those countries, but likely have a relatively limited effect overall on resources needed to meet visa demand and on State’s visa fee revenues. The volume of visa applications is relatively small in most of the 13 “Road Map” countries the executive branch is considering for expansion. If all 13 Road Map countries were admitted to the Visa Waiver Program, we estimate that at least 7.7 million (the average number of people who travel to the United States from VWP countries each year) to as much as 12.6 million (the average number of people who travel to the United States from VWP countries each year)—that could overwhelm visa operations in the near term. To meet visa demand, State officials said they could need approximately 45 new facilities, which we estimate could cost $3.8 billion to $5.7 billion. We estimate State would also need substantially more staff—around 540 new Foreign Service officers at a cost of around $185 million to $201 million per year, and 1,350 local Foreign Service national staff at around $168 million to $190 million per year, as well as additional management and support positions for a total annual cost of $447 million to $486 million. Because VWP elimination would increase the number of travelers needing a visa, we estimate annual visa fee revenues would increase substantially, by $1.7 billion to $1.8 billion, and would offset the year-to-year recurring staffing costs. State has done limited planning for how it would address increased visa demand if the program were suspended or eliminated.

What GAO Recommended

GAO recommends: (1) State and U.S. embassies in VWP countries develop contingency plans in the event of program elimination; and (2) DHS and State develop estimates of increased visa demand resulting from ESTA, and State develops plans to manage the increased workload. State said it would ask embassies to discuss plans to manage possible program elimination, but did not note whether it fully concurred with our recommendation. State agreed with the need to plan for ESTA, but noted its ability to plan was limited because DHS had not yet resolved critical details about ESTA. DHS agreed with our recommendation.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on GAO-08-623. For more information, contact Jess Ford at (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov.