



Highlights of [GAO-08-891](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2007, following the implementation of new document requirements for travelers entering the United States from within the Western Hemisphere, the Department of State (State) received a record number of passport applications. In June 2009 further document requirements are scheduled to go into effect and will likely lead to another surge in passport demand. GAO examined (1) the extent to which State was prepared for the surge in passport demand and how its readiness affected passport operations, (2) State's actions to increase passport production capacity in response to the surge, and (3) State's readiness for near-term surges in demand and its strategy to improve passport operations. GAO interviewed officials from State and the Departments of the Treasury and Homeland Security, conducted site visits, and reviewed data on passport processing times and reports on passport operations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of State develop a comprehensive, long-term strategy for passport operations using a business enterprise approach to prioritize and synchronize its planned improvements. GAO also recommends that State track passport applications from the time the applicant submits an application in order to provide better customer service. State took issue with some of the findings in this report, but agreed with its recommendations.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-891](#). For more information, contact Jess T. Ford at (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov.

STATE DEPARTMENT

Comprehensive Strategy Needed to Improve Passport Operations

What GAO Found

State was unprepared for the record number of passport applications it received in 2007, leading to significant delays in passport processing. State underestimated the increase in demand and consequently was not able to provide enough notice to the financial agent it uses for passport application payment processing for the agent to prepare for the increased workload, further adding to delays. As a result, reported wait times reached 10 to 12 weeks in the summer of 2007—more than double the normal wait—with hundreds of thousands of passports taking significantly longer. State had difficulty tracking individual applications and failed to effectively measure or communicate to applicants the total expected wait times, prompting many to re-apply and further straining State's processing capacity.

State took a number of emergency measures and accelerated other planned efforts to increase its passport production capacity in 2007. For example, to help adjudicate passports, State established four adjudication task forces and deployed passport specialists to U.S. passport agencies severely affected by the surge. In addition, State accelerated hiring and expansion efforts. As a result of these efforts and the normal seasonal decline in passport applications, wait times returned to normal by October 2007. According to State estimates, these emergency measures cost \$42.8 million.

Although State has taken steps to improve its ability to respond to near-term surges in passport demand, it lacks a comprehensive strategy to improve long-term passport operations. State previously identified several deficiencies limiting the efficiency and effectiveness of passport operations, such as reliance on a paper-based work flow and ineffective communications, and these deficiencies were exposed by State's response to the surge. While State also identified a framework to guide its modernization efforts, it does not have a comprehensive plan to prioritize and synchronize improvements to its passport operations. A comprehensive strategy for making these improvements—for example, using a business enterprise approach—would better equip State to handle a significantly higher workload in the future.

Average Routine Passport Processing Time, 2005-2007

