

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-773](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

International travel and tourism contributed \$220 billion to the U.S. economy and supported 1.1 million jobs in 2014, according to the Department of Commerce. A portion of those travelers to the United States were required to obtain an NIV. After a period in which travelers experienced extensive waits in obtaining a required interview for an NIV in 2011, the President issued E.O. 13597 in 2012 to improve visa and foreign visitor processing, while continuing to protect U.S. national security. The E.O. set goals for State to increase NIV processing capacity in Brazil and China and reduce NIV interview wait times for applicants worldwide. This report examines (1) efforts State has undertaken to expand capacity and reduce NIV applicants' interview wait times and the reported results to date and (2) challenges that impact State's ability to efficiently process NIVs. GAO analyzed State's historical and forecast NIV data and interviewed State officials in Washington, D.C., and consular officers and management in Brazil, China, India, and Mexico. These countries represent the four highest demand countries for U.S. NIVs.

What GAO Recommends

To improve State's ability to process NIVs, while maintaining a high level of security to protect our borders, GAO is recommending that State (1) evaluate the relative impact of efforts undertaken to improve NIV processing and (2) document a plan for obtaining input from end users (consular officers) to help improve their satisfaction and prioritize enhancements to IT systems. State concurred with both recommendations.

View [GAO-15-773](#). For more information, contact Michael Courts at (202) 512-8980 or courtsm@gao.gov.

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NONIMMIGRANT VISAS

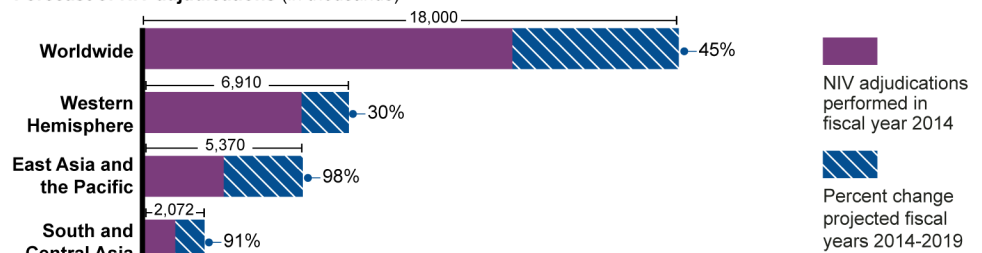
State Has Reduced Applicant Interview Wait Times, but Sustainability of Gains Is Uncertain

What GAO Found

Since 2012, the Department of State (State) has undertaken several efforts to increase nonimmigrant visa (NIV) processing capacity and decrease applicant interview wait times. Specifically, it has increased consular staffing levels and implemented policy and management changes, such as contracting out administrative support services. According to State officials, these efforts have allowed State to meet the goals of Executive Order (E.O.) 13597 of increasing its NIV processing capacity by 40 percent in Brazil and China within 1 year and ensuring that 80 percent of worldwide NIV applicants are able to schedule an interview within 3 weeks of State receiving their application. Specifically, State increased the number of consular officers in Brazil and China by 122 and 46 percent, respectively, within a year of the issuance of E.O. 13597. Additionally, according to State data, since July 2012, at least 80 percent of worldwide applicants seeking a tourist visa have been able to schedule an interview within 3 weeks.

Two key challenges—rising NIV demand and problems with NIV information technology (IT) systems—could affect State's ability to sustain the lower NIV interview wait times. First, State projects the number of NIV applicants to rise worldwide from 12.4 million in fiscal year 2014 to 18.0 million in fiscal year 2019, an increase of 45 percent (see figure).

Nonimmigrant Visa (NIV) Adjudications Forecast through Fiscal Year 2019
Forecast of NIV adjudications (in thousands)



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data. | GAO-15-773

Given this projected NIV demand and budgetary limits on State's ability to hire more consular officers at posts, State must find ways to achieve additional NIV processing efficiencies or risk being unable to meet the goals of E.O. 13597 in the future. Though State's evaluation policy stresses that it is important for bureaus to evaluate management processes to improve their effectiveness and inform planning, State has not evaluated the relative effectiveness of its various efforts to improve NIV processing. Without conducting a systematic evaluation, State cannot determine which of its efforts have had the greatest impact on NIV processing efficiency. Second, consular officers in focus groups expressed concern about their ability to efficiently conduct adjudications given State's current IT systems. While State is currently enhancing its IT systems, it does not systematically collect information on end user (i.e., consular officer) satisfaction to help plan and guide its improvements, as leading practices would recommend. Without this information, it is unclear if these enhancements will address consular officers' concerns, such as having to enter the same data multiple times, and enable them to achieve increased NIV processing efficiency in the future.