



September 2015

NONIMMIGRANT VISAS

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

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.

NONIMMIGRANT VISAS

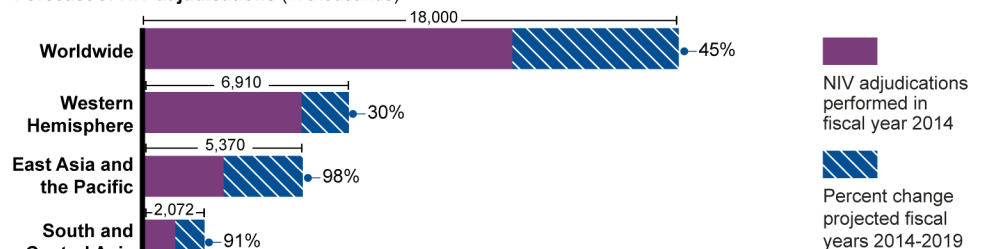
State Has Reduced Applicant Interview Wait Times, but Sustainability of Gains Is Uncertain

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.

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Abbreviations

CCD	Consular Consolidated Database
Commerce	Department of Commerce
CST	Office of Consular Systems and Technology
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
E.O.	executive order
FY	fiscal year
IT	information technology
IWP	Interview Waiver Program
LNA	limited noncareer appointment
NIV	nonimmigrant visa
State	Department of State

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September 9, 2015

Congressional Requesters

Over 74 million international travelers contributed \$220.6 billion to the U.S. economy and supported 1.1 million jobs in 2014, according to the Department of Commerce (Commerce). A portion of those travelers to the United States were temporary visitors who were required to obtain a nonimmigrant visa (NIV) from the Department of State (State) prior to their arrival at a U.S. port of entry.¹ In 2011, State reported that visa applicants at some U.S. embassies and consulates abroad (hereafter referred to as “posts”), including strategically important posts in Brazil and China, were facing extensive waits in obtaining an interview for visas for temporary tourism or business purposes, a category of NIVs.² Although maintaining security is of paramount importance, State has acknowledged that long interview wait times for NIVs may discourage legitimate travel to the United States, potentially costing the country billions of dollars in economic benefits over time and adversely influencing foreign citizens’ opinions of our nation. Given the importance of the travel and tourism industry to the U.S. economy and job creation, the President issued Executive Order (E.O.) 13597 in January 2012 to improve NIV processing and travel promotion in order to create jobs and spur economic growth in the United States, while continuing to protect U.S. national security.³

¹An NIV allows an individual to appear at a port of entry to apply for admission to the United States. A port of entry is any officially designated location (seaport, airport, or land border location) where Department of Homeland Security officers or employees are assigned to clear passengers and merchandise, collect duties, and enforce customs laws.

²NIVs are issued to persons who reside permanently outside the United States but who wish to be in the United States on a temporary basis. “Interview wait time” is broadly defined as the amount of time that visa applicants must wait from the time of attempting to schedule an interview to when they appear for an NIV interview at a U.S. embassy or consulate.

³Exec. Order No. 13597, *Establishing Visa and Foreign Visitor Processing Goals and the Task Force On Travel and Competitiveness*, 77 Fed Reg. 3,373, Jan. 19, 2012.

You asked us to examine State's NIV processing operations and provide an update on the status of the goals in E.O. 13597.⁴ 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.

To determine the efforts State has undertaken to expand capacity and reduce NIV applicants' interview wait times, we reviewed relevant State documents, interviewed State, Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and Commerce officials, and conducted 11 focus groups with U.S. consular officers⁵ in Beijing, China; Mexico City, Mexico; New Delhi, India; and São Paulo, Brazil—the locations of embassies or consulates serving the four highest demand countries for U.S. NIVs. To determine the reported results of those efforts, we collected and analyzed data on NIV processing capacity and interview wait times for visas for tourism or business purposes (commonly referred to as "B visas")⁶ worldwide from January 2011 until July 2015 and compared those data with the goals outlined in E.O. 13597; we also reviewed documentation provided by State on their efficiency efforts. To determine the challenges that impact State's ability to efficiently process NIVs, we reviewed relevant documents, including planning and NIV demand projection documents and State's Foreign Affairs Manual, and interviewed State officials in Washington, D.C., including officials from State's Office of Inspector General, as well as DHS and Commerce officials, and consular officers who adjudicate NIVs at the four posts we visited. See appendix I for more information on our scope and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from September 2014 to September 2015 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the

⁴This review was conducted in response to a 2014 request from Senators Schatz, Rubio, Klobuchar, and Kirk who were then, respectively, Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee on Tourism, Competitiveness, and Innovation of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation.

⁵For purposes of this report, "consular officers" include State Foreign Service officers, limited noncareer appointment personnel, qualified appointment eligible family members, and State civil service employees participating in the Civil Service Excursions program to provide visa and passport adjudication services in U.S. consular sections overseas.

⁶B visas are one type of NIVs, for aliens having residence in a foreign country who are visiting the United States temporarily for tourism or business.

audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

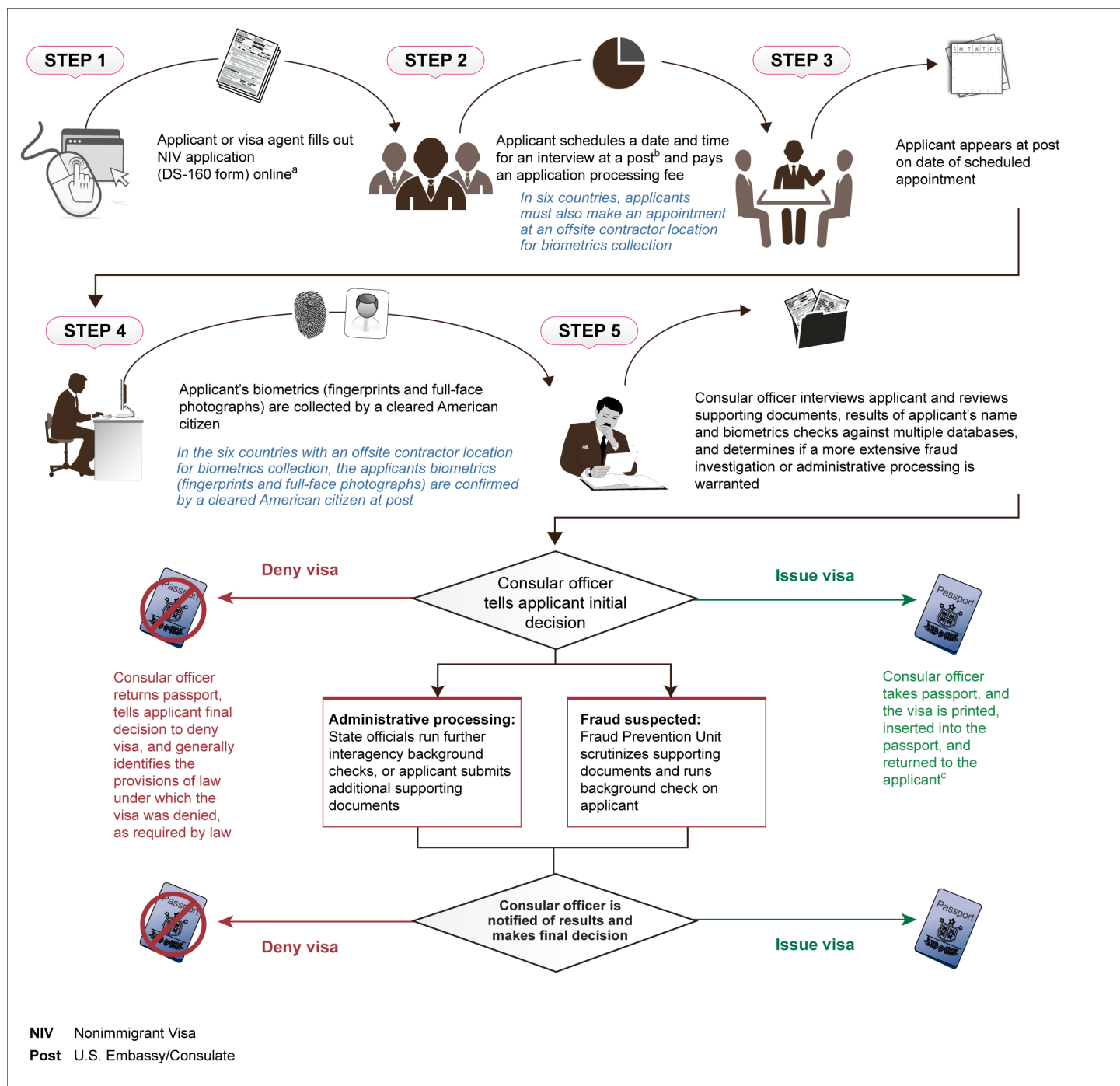
NIV Application and Adjudication Process

Foreign nationals who wish to come to the United States on a temporary basis and are not citizens of countries that participate in the Visa Waiver Program must generally obtain an NIV.⁷ U.S. law provides for the temporary admission of various categories of foreign nationals, who are known as nonimmigrants. Nonimmigrants include a wide range of visitors, such as tourists, foreign students, diplomats, and temporary workers who are admitted for a designated period of time and a specific purpose. There are dozens of specific types of NIVs that nonimmigrants can obtain for tourism, business, student, temporary worker, and other purposes. State manages the application process for these visas, as well as the consular officer corps and its functions, at over 220 visa-issuing posts overseas. The process for determining who will be issued or refused a visa contains several steps, including documentation reviews; collection of biometrics (fingerprints and full-face photographs); cross-referencing an applicant's name and biometrics against multiple databases maintained by the U.S. government; and in-person interviews. Personal interviews with consular officers are required by law for most foreign nationals seeking NIVs.⁸ For an overview of the visa process, see figure 1.

⁷Citizens or nationals of countries in the Visa Waiver Program (VWP), administered by DHS, are eligible to travel to the United States for tourism or business for stays of 90 days or less without first obtaining a visa. 8 U.S.C. § 1187. There are currently 38 countries designated as VWP countries. Citizens or nationals of countries that do not participate in the VWP must obtain an NIV to travel to the United States. Upon arriving at a port of entry, nonimmigrants must undergo inspection by DHS officers, who determine whether or not they may be admitted into the United States. If DHS determines a nonimmigrant is admissible, he or she is granted an authorized period of admission.

⁸According to U.S. law, every alien applying for an NIV who is at least 14 years old and not more than 79 years old must submit to an in-person interview with a consular officer unless the alien meets specific criteria and the interview is waived under certain circumstances by either the consular officer or the Secretary of State. 8 U.S.C. § 1202(h).

Figure 1: Nonimmigrant Visa Application and Adjudication Process



Sources: GAO (analysis); Department of State (data); Art Explosion (clipart). | GAO-15-773

^aPrior to this step, some NIVs require petitioners to file a petition on behalf of the applicant with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). DHS is responsible for approving or denying the petition, notifying the petitioner, and sending the approved petition to State.

^bApplicants who qualify for State's Interview Waiver Program are not required to schedule or appear at post for an interview for their NIV application to be adjudicated by a consular officer.

^cIn Mexico, applicants can either apply for an NIV in the form of a border-crossing card or a traditional machine-readable visa that is inserted into an applicant's passport. For border-crossing cards, if the application is approved, the consular officer returns the passport to the applicant and a border-crossing card is printed off-site and then shipped back to post for delivery to the applicant.

DHS sets visa policy, in consultation with State, and Commerce oversees the creation and implementation of strategies to promote tourism in the United States, such as the National Travel and Tourism Strategy called for in E.O. 13597.⁹

Long Wait Times for NIV Interviews Have Been a Challenge

We have previously reported on visa delays at overseas posts:

- In April 2006, we testified that, of nine posts with wait times in excess of 90 days in February 2006, six were in Brazil, India, and Mexico.¹⁰
- In July 2007, we reported that 20 posts said they experienced maximum monthly wait times in excess of 90 days at least once over the past year.¹¹

More recently, State has reported long interview wait times in Brazil and China. For example, in June 2010, NIV interview wait times reached 100 days at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, China, and in August 2011, interview

⁹The Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) charges the Secretary of Homeland Security with the administration and enforcement of all laws relating to the immigration and naturalization of aliens, except when those powers and duties are assigned to other specified executive officers. 8 U.S.C. § 1103(a)(1). Federal law also grants the Secretary the authority to issue regulations with respect to, administer, and enforce the provisions of [the INA] and of all immigration and nationality laws, relating to the functions of consular officers of the United States in connection with the granting or refusal of visas. 6 U.S.C. § 236(b)(1); see also 6 U.S.C. § 202(4). Certain visa-related authorities, such as those concerning foreign diplomats, are reserved to the Secretary of State. 6 U.S.C. § 236(c)(2). The Secretaries of Homeland Security and State work together to delineate areas of responsibility consistent with the law, as memorialized in a 2003 memorandum of understanding.

¹⁰GAO, *Border Security: Reassessment of Consular Resource Requirements Could Help Address Visa Delays*, [GAO-06-542T](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 4, 2006).

¹¹GAO, *Border Security: Long-term Strategy Needed to Keep Pace With Increasing Demand for Visas*, [GAO-07-847](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 13, 2007).

wait times reached 143 days at the U.S. Consulate in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

2012 Executive Order Sets Goals for Improvement

Following the rise of interview wait times at many posts, and especially in Brazil and China, President Obama issued E.O. 13597 in January 2012 to improve visa processing and travel promotion while continuing to protect U.S. national security. E.O. 13597 contained multiple goals for State and DHS for processing visitors to the United States, including the following:

- Ensure that 80 percent of NIV applicants worldwide are interviewed within 3 weeks of receipt of application.
- Increase NIV processing capacity in Brazil and China by 40 percent over the next year.¹²

In March 2012, State and DHS released an implementation plan for E.O. 13597 that outlined the measures each agency planned to undertake to meet the goals of the Executive Order.¹³ Subsequently, in August 2012, State and DHS issued a progress report on E.O. 13597 stating the progress made in meeting the goals of the Executive Order and the plans for continued efforts to improve a foreign visitor's experience in traveling to the United States.¹⁴

¹²E.O. 13597 also contained a number of goals for DHS to facilitate legitimate travel to the United States, such as to increase efforts to expand the VWP and travel by nationals of VWP participant countries. For purposes of this report, we are only examining the goals implemented by State in E.O. 13597.

¹³DHS and State, *Executive Order 13597: Improvements to Visa Processing and Foreign Visitor Processing 60-Day Implementation Plan* (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 19, 2012).

¹⁴DHS and State, *Executive Order 13597: Improvements to Visa Processing and Foreign Visitor Processing 180-Day Progress Report* (Washington, D.C.: August 2012).

State Has Undertaken Various Efforts to Improve NIV Processing Capacity and Has Reduced NIV Interview Wait Times

State Has Implemented Multiple Efforts to Reduce NIV Interview Wait Times

State's Bureau of Consular Affairs, as well as consular management officials and consular officers at the four posts we visited, reported that increased staffing levels, policy changes, and organizational reforms implemented since 2012 have all contributed to increasing NIV processing capacity, reducing NIV interview wait times worldwide. For calculating NIV interview wait times, we used data from State on applications for visas for tourism and business purposes (B visas) and did not include other NIV categories.¹⁵

Staffing Level Increases

According to State's Bureau of Consular Affairs, the past hiring of additional staff through various authorities and temporary assignments of consular officers during periods of high NIV demand contributed to meeting E.O. 13597's goals of expanding NIV processing capacity and reducing worldwide wait times, particularly at U.S. posts in Brazil, China, India, and Mexico.¹⁶

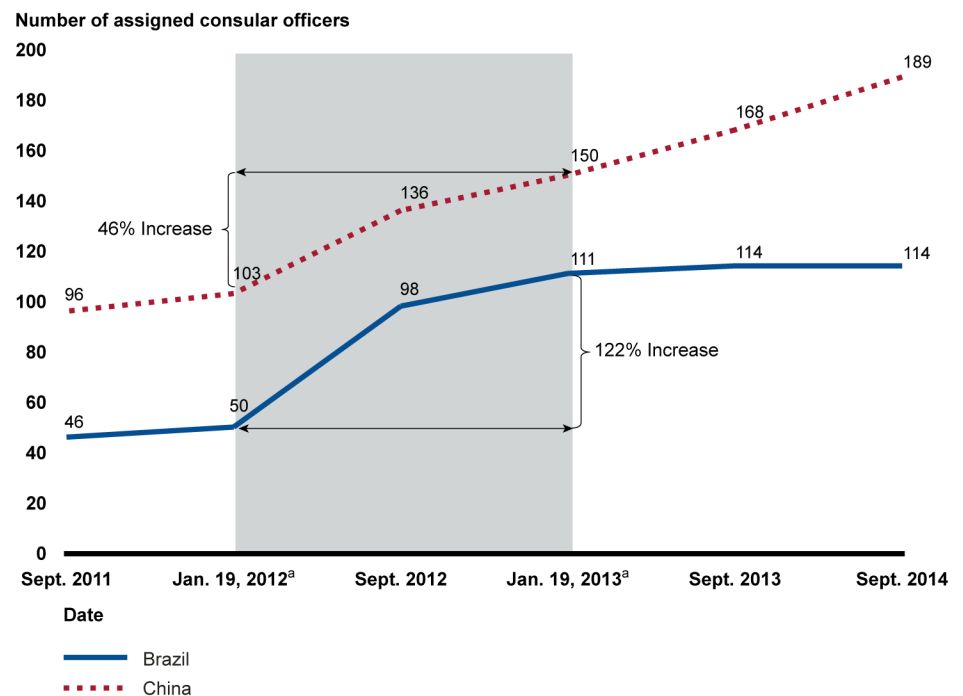
- **Increase in consular officers:** According to State officials, from fiscal year 2012 through 2014, State "surged" the number of consular

¹⁵State calculates its wait times for the goals of E.O. 13597 by measuring only B visa wait times, because B visa applications comprise the majority of all NIV applications. In fiscal year 2014, these NIVs for tourism and business purposes represented 79 percent of all NIV applications received at posts worldwide. B visas are NIVs for persons who want to enter the United States temporarily for business (visa category B-1), tourism, pleasure, or visiting (visa category B-2), or a combination of both purposes (B-1/B-2). In addition, B1/B2 visa/border-crossing cards are issued to applicants who are citizens of and reside in Mexico (visa category BCC).

¹⁶State categorizes Brazil, China, India, and Mexico as "high demand markets." In fiscal year 2014, these four countries represented 47 percent of the U.S. NIV demand worldwide.

officers deployed worldwide from 1,636 to 1,883 to help address increasing demand for NIVs, an increase of 15 percent over 3 years. In response to E.O. 13597, State increased the number of deployed consular officers between January 19, 2012 (the date of E.O. 13597), and January 19, 2013, from 50 to 111 in Brazil, and 103 to 150 in China, a 122 and 46 percent increase, respectively (see fig. 2 for additional information on consular staffing increases in Brazil and China). As a result, State met its goal of increasing its NIV processing capacity in Brazil and China by 40 percent within a year of the issuance of E.O. 13597.

Figure 2: Consular Staffing Levels in Brazil and China, Fiscal Years 2011 to 2014



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

^aExecutive Order 13597, issued on January 19, 2012, set a goal for the Department of State (State) to increase nonimmigrant visa processing capacity in Brazil and China by 40 percent within 1 year of issuance of the Executive Order, or by January 19, 2013. State determined that processing capacity increases would be measured by consular staffing levels.

- Limited noncareer appointments:** In fiscal year 2012, State's Bureau of Consular Affairs launched the limited noncareer appointment (LNA) pilot program to quickly deploy language-qualified staff to posts facing an increase in NIV demand and workload. The first cohort of LNAs—who are hired on a temporary basis for up to 5

years for specific, time-bound purposes—including 19 Portuguese speakers for Brazil and 24 Mandarin speakers for China who were part of the increased number of consular officers deployed to posts noted above. In fiscal year 2013, State expanded the LNA program to include Spanish speakers. As of August 2015, State had hired 95 LNAs for Brazil, China, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Mexico.

- **Temporary assignment of consular officers:** State utilizes the temporary redeployment of Foreign Service officers and LNAs to address staffing gaps and increases in NIV demand. Between October 2011 and July 2012, State assigned, on temporary duty, 220 consular officers to Brazil and 48 consular officers to China as part of its effort to reallocate resources to posts experiencing high NIV demand. State continues to use this method to respond to increases in NIV demand. For example, during the first quarter of fiscal year 2015, India experienced a surge in NIV demand that pushed NIV interview wait times over 21 days at three posts. To alleviate the situation, consular managers in India sent officers to the U.S. Consulate in Mumbai, which was experiencing higher wait times, from other posts, allowing the U.S. Mission in India to reduce average wait times to approximately 10 days by the end of December 2014.

Policy Changes

According to State officials, policy changes have also helped to reduce NIV interview wait times at posts, including the expansion of the Interview Waiver Program (IWP) for NIVs and extending the validity of some NIVs.

- **Expansion of interview waiver program:** The IWP allows posts to waive the in-person NIV interview requirements for defined categories of “low-risk” applicants or applicants renewing an NIV for some visa categories.¹⁷ In 2012, the IWP for the U.S. Mission in Brazil was expanded to include first time applicants under the age of 16 or over the age of 66.¹⁸ This expansion allowed the U.S. Mission in Brazil to conduct additional walk-in NIV interviews by diverting first-time NIV

¹⁷According to State, the interview waiver options do not represent a reduced scrutiny of applicants; rather, they are intended to enhance the security of the visa process by allowing State to focus more of its resources on potential threats. For instance, NIV applicants eligible for interview waivers continue to be subject to required name checks and biometric screening, and consular officers have the option to require an interview of any applicant if there is any doubt as to the applicant’s credibility or to resolve any other eligibility questions raised by the application.

¹⁸Prior to the IWP expansion in Brazil, any applicant (first-time or renewal) could have his or her interview waived if he or she is under 14 years of age or over 79 years of age.

applicants that State considers to be low-risk and renewals from presenting themselves at post for an interview. According to State officials, discussions with DHS are underway to further expand the IWP.

- **Extending the validity period of visas:** In accordance with federal law, State has extended the validity period of some visas in some countries, reducing the frequency with which a holder of a U.S. NIV would be required to apply for a renewal. (The visa validity period is the length of time the holder of a U.S. NIV is permitted to travel to a port of entry in the United States.) In November 2014, the United States and the People's Republic of China reciprocally increased the validity periods of multiple-entry business and tourist visas issued to each other's citizens for up to 10 years. The change in policy was intended to support improved trade, investment, and business by facilitating travel between the two countries. Furthermore, the extension of visa validity periods, according to State officials, is also expected to reduce the number of visas requiring adjudication over the long term at posts in China.

Organizational Reforms

State's Bureau of Consular Affairs has adopted several organizational reforms to improve its NIV processing efficiency. These include contracting out some administrative support duties, establishing leadership and management practices to better guide consular officers, and opening additional consulates to expand NIV processing capacity in certain countries and redesigning consular sections at post.

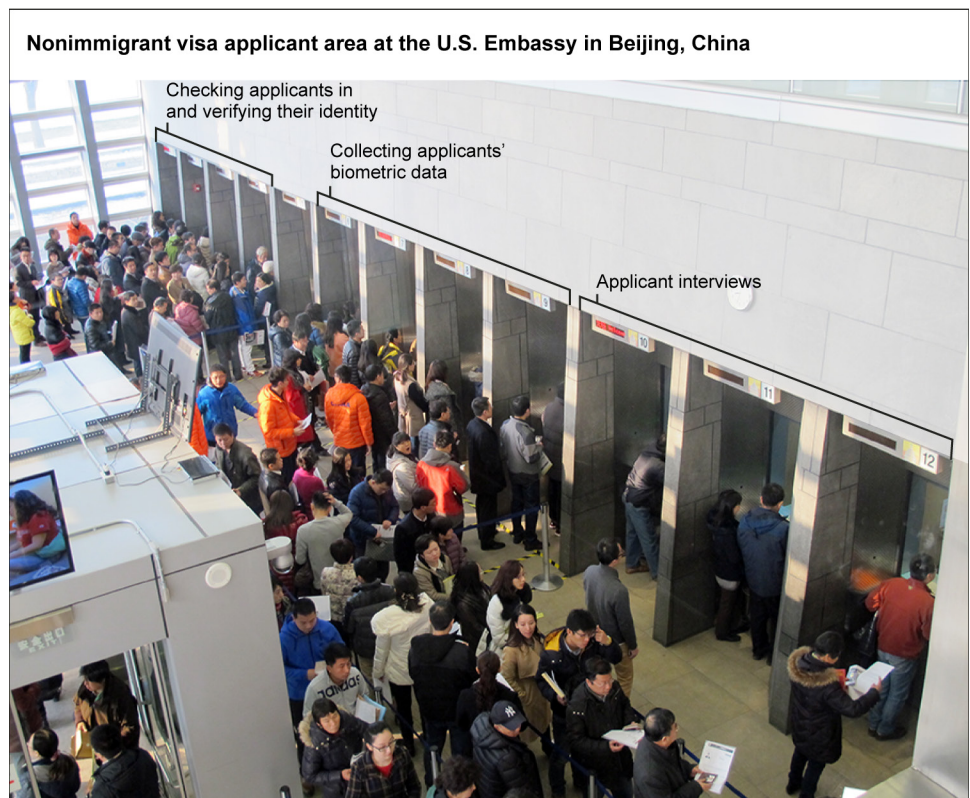
- **Contracting for administrative support duties:** The use of a worldwide support services contract has enabled posts to outsource certain administrative activities related to visa processing that would otherwise be handled by consular personnel. This effort, according to State officials, allows consular officers more time to focus on visa adjudication and therefore improves their productivity. The contract provides support services for visa operations at U.S. embassies and consulates, including NIV interview appointment scheduling and fee collection services. Contractors have opened 29 off-site locations in six countries to collect biometric data of NIV applicants, which are then forwarded to the post for processing and security screening prior to an applicant's scheduled interview.¹⁹ Before the implementation of

¹⁹According to State officials, at posts where the contractor collects biometrics information at an off-site location, that biometric information is to be verified by a cleared American citizen when the applicant appears at the U.S. embassy or consulate for his or her NIV interview.

the contract in fiscal year 2011, biometric information could be collected at the post only when the applicant appeared for his or her interview. Consular officials we spoke with in Brazil and India stated that off-site biometric collection has added additional efficiencies to the NIV process.

- **Leadership and management changes:** In 2012, State's Bureau of Consular Affairs launched the 1CA office to help further develop a culture of leadership, management, and innovation under budget austerity and increasing NIV demand. In three of the four posts we visited, embassy officials told us that 1CA tools and resources have helped management at post identify and develop solutions to delays in NIV processing, which they said has contributed to the ability of State to reduce NIV interview wait times. For example, the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City is using 1CA to map out NIV processing steps to identify and develop solutions to existing bottlenecks. According to consular managers at post, the process maps allow managers to graphically view the various NIV processing steps and identify where improvements can be implemented. The solutions developed from the 1CA mapping exercise have allowed the post to conduct a larger number of NIV interviews each day. In addition, the 1CA office is in the process of developing meaningful metrics, beyond NIV interview wait times, to provide consular managers with the data to improve performance.
- **Opening additional consulates and redesigning consular sections:** Since the issuance of E.O. 13597, State has expanded the number of interview windows at posts in Brazil and China and developed plans to open two additional consulates in Brazil and add visa services to the existing U.S. consulate in Wuhan, China, to help absorb increases in NIV demand. Additionally, at all four posts we visited, State officials told us that they have, to varying degrees, redesigned the responsibilities and location of their consular staff to improve the efficiency of their operations. For example, in China, India, and Mexico, officials reported that they have individualized the tasks that are performed at each interview window to reduce the time an applicant spends at post and streamline NIV processing. Additionally, at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, each interview window within the consular section is assigned to conduct a discrete task in the NIV adjudication process. These tasks include checking-in and confirming an applicant's identity, collecting biometric data, and adjudicating NIVs at separate windows (see fig. 3 for a photograph of the NIV applicant area at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, China).

Figure 3: Nonimmigrant Visa Applicant Area at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, China



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

- **Transfer of NIV adjudications:** State has redistributed IWP adjudications within the same country to posts experiencing low NIV demand and has created an IWP adjudication section in the United States to better leverage NIV processing resources. Several missions we visited transfer IWP adjudications from a post experiencing high demand to a post experiencing low demand. For example, from February 2014 to April 2015, consular managers in the U.S. Mission in Mexico electronically transferred 44,240 IWP cases from the U.S. Consulate in Guadalajara to the U.S. Consulates in Ciudad Juarez, Matamoros, and Nogales. According to officials, the electronic transfer of the IWP adjudications allowed the U.S. Consulate in Guadalajara to keep NIV interview wait times under 21 days. Additionally, in May 2015, State's Bureau of Consular Affairs created an IWP remote processing unit in the United States to support the U.S. Mission in China. According to State officials, the output of the unit is currently over 1,000 IWP cases per day; and when fully staffed with 30

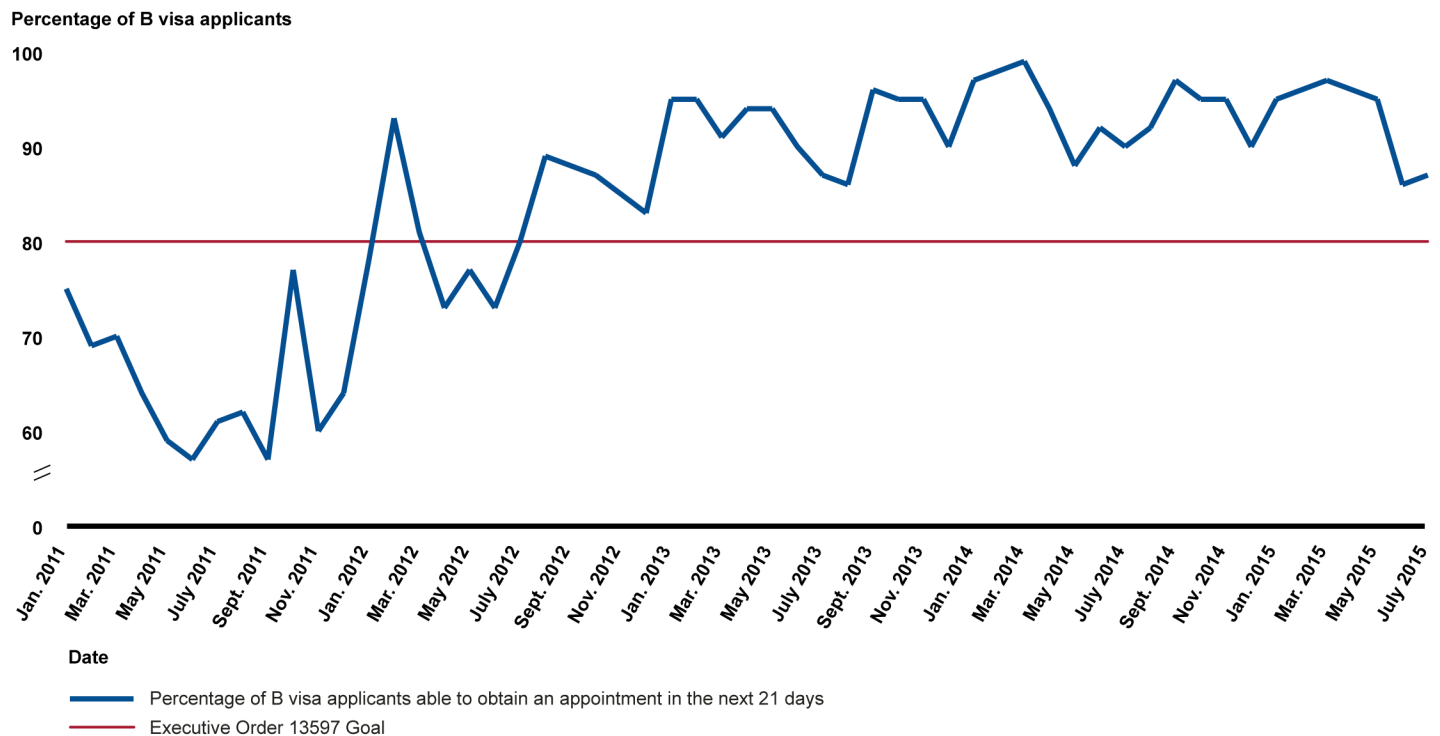
consular officers by December 2015, the unit will be able to process up to 3,000 cases per day.

State Has Reduced NIV Interview Wait Times

According to State officials, efforts the Bureau of Consular Affairs has implemented since the issuance of E.O. 13597 have reduced NIV interview wait times worldwide, including in Brazil and China. According to State data, even as NIV demand has increased, State has seen NIV interview wait times generally decline. Specifically, as figure 4 shows, since July 2012, at least 80 percent of B visa applicants worldwide have been able to obtain an interview within 3 weeks of their application. This indicates that the goal of E.O. 13597 is, so far, being met.²⁰

²⁰For comparing NIV wait times with the goal enumerated in E.O. 13597, State measures only B visa wait times, because B visa applications comprise the majority of all NIV applications. In fiscal year 2014, these NIVs for tourism and business purposes represented 79 percent of all NIV applications received at posts worldwide. Additionally, according to officials at State's Bureau of Consular Affairs, a scheduled NIV interview is used as a proxy to measure compliance with E.O. 13597's goal of conducting interviews within the specified time frame. State uses this proxy because NIV applicants have the ability to schedule an NIV interview up to 6 months in the future after submitting their NIV application.

Figure 4: Percentage of B Visa Applicants Able to Obtain an Interview Appointment within 21 Days, January 2011-July 2015



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

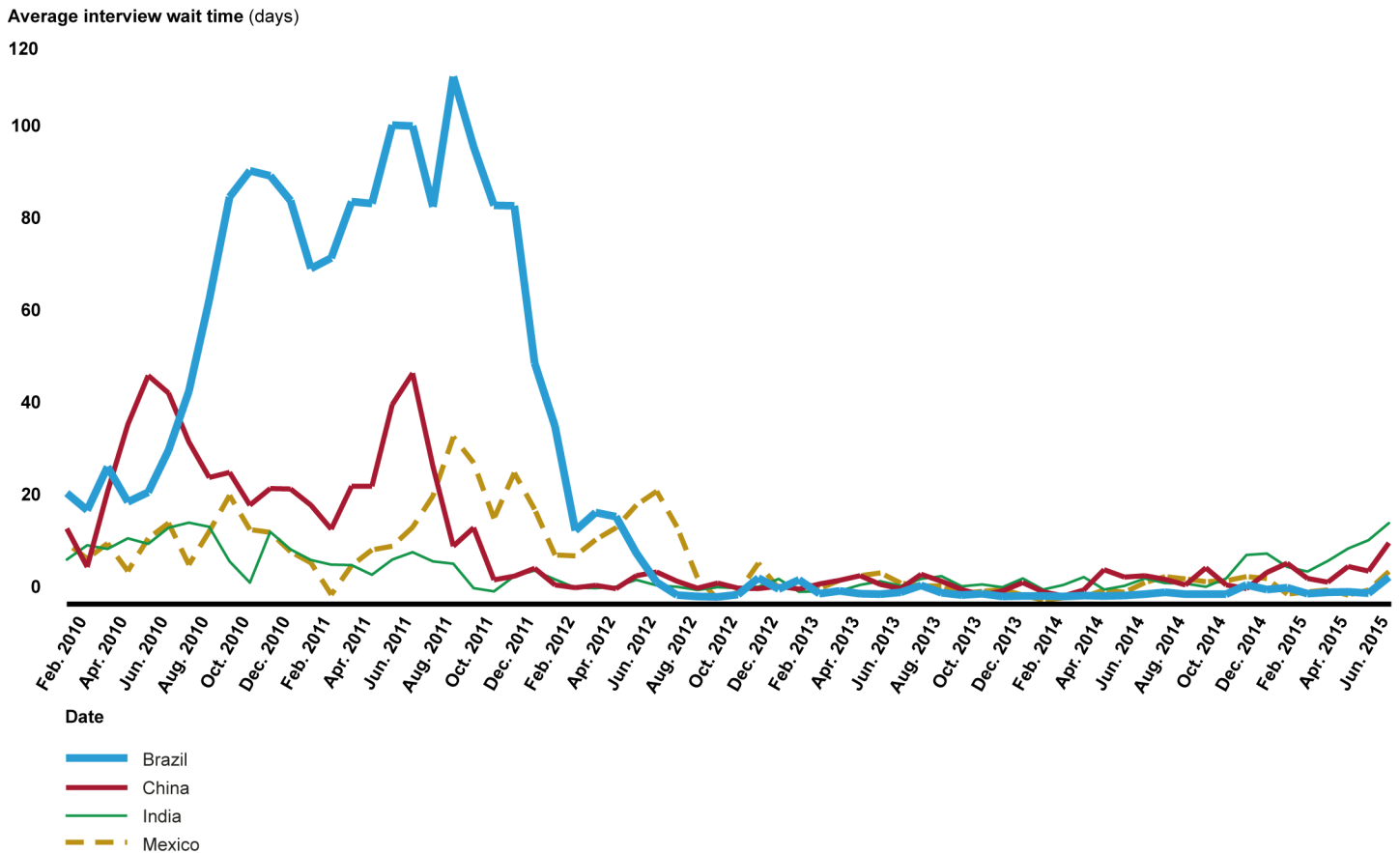
Note: In this figure, only the wait times for business and tourist visas (B visas) are shown, since they represented 79 percent of all nonimmigrant visas (NIV) in fiscal year 2014, and this wait time is what State uses to measure NIV wait times against the goal in E.O. 13597.

NIV B visa interview wait times have also decreased even as NIV workloads have increased in Brazil and China, two countries that have historically experienced long interview wait times for NIV applicants. For example, B visa interview wait times decreased from an average high of 114 days in August 2011 to 2 days in September 2012 for posts in Brazil, and from an average high of 50 days in June 2011 to 2 days in February 2014 for posts in China (see fig. 5 for additional average wait times at posts in India and Mexico).²¹ Between January 2010 and December

²¹The average B visa interview wait times are weighted by the number of B visa applicants received by each post within a country per month.

2014, State reported that NIV workloads from Brazil and China increased by 161 percent and 88 percent respectively.²²

Figure 5: Average B Visa Interview Wait Times in Brazil, China, India, and Mexico from January 2010 to June 2015



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

Note: In this figure, only the wait times for business and tourist visas (B visas) are shown, since they represented 79 percent of all nonimmigrant visas (NIV) in fiscal year 2014, and this wait time is what State uses to measure NIV wait times against the goal in Executive Order 13597.

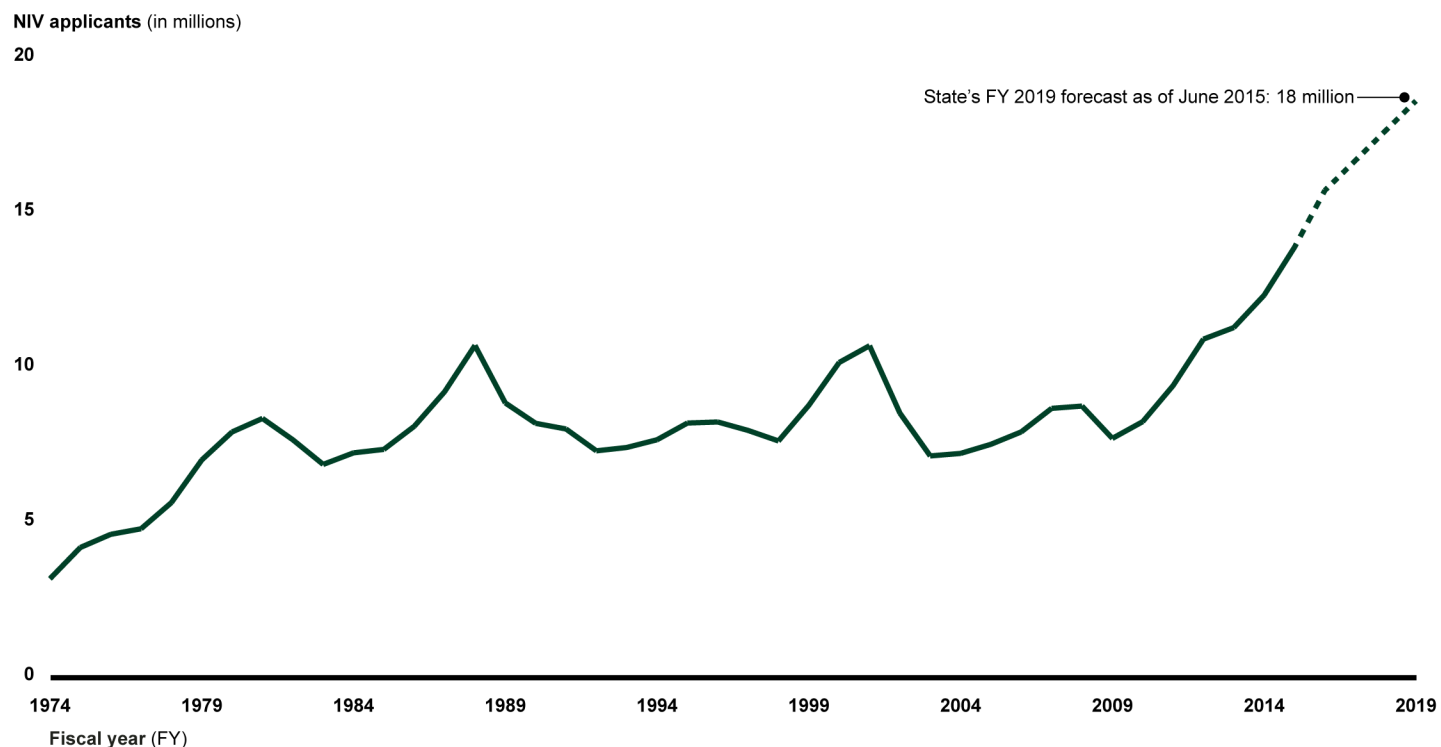
²²NIV applicant workload is defined as the number of NIV applications adjudicated, and includes those for applicants who received in-person interviews and those for whom interviews were waived through the IWP.

Rising NIV Demand and Significant Technology Concerns Could Impact State's NIV Processing Operations

Projected NIV Demand Increases May Affect the Sustainability of State's Efforts to Keep Wait Times Low

State projects that the number of NIV applicants will rise worldwide from 12.4 million in fiscal year 2014 to 18.0 million in fiscal year 2019, an increase of 45 percent. Although NIV demand generally fluctuates and undergoes significant increases and decreases from outside factors—such as shifts in the world economy and events like the September 2001 terrorist attacks—the demand is generally trending upwards, and has been for the past 40 years (see fig. 6).

Figure 6: Worldwide Nonimmigrant Visa (NIV) Applicants, Fiscal Years 1974-2014, and Projected NIV Applicants, Fiscal Years 2015-2019

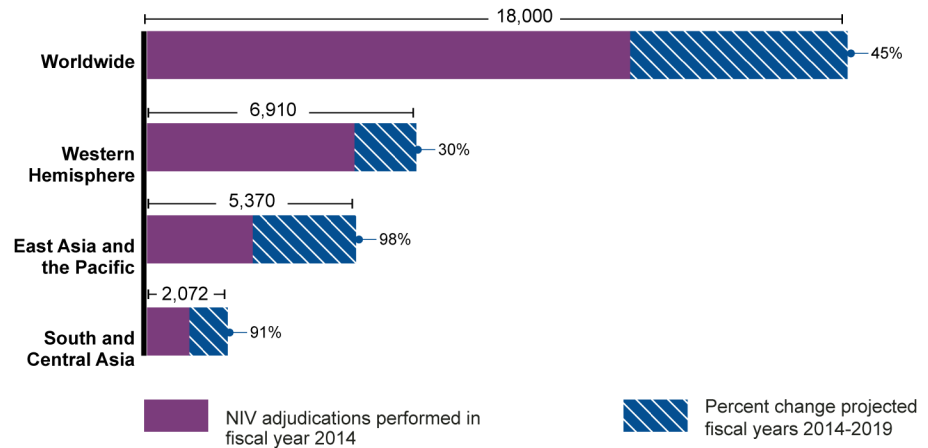


Source: Department of State. | GAO-15-773

According to State's projections, NIV applications from the East Asia and Pacific region and the South and Central Asia region, will increase by about 98 and 91 percent, respectively, from fiscal year 2014 to fiscal year 2019. The Western Hemisphere region is expected to receive approximately 6.9 million applicants by fiscal year 2019, an increase of approximately 30 percent from fiscal year 2014 (see fig. 7).

Figure 7: Forecast of Nonimmigrant Visa (NIV) Adjudications from Fiscal Year 2014 to Fiscal Year 2019

Forecast of NIV adjudications (in thousands)



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

State has underestimated growth in NIV demand in past projections. In 2005, State contracted with an independent consulting firm to project growth in NIV applicant volume through 2020. As of 2014, 13 of the 18 countries included in this study had exceeded their 2014 NIV demand projections. The study also underestimated the sharp escalation of NIV demand in Brazil and China. By 2014, Brazil's demand had already exceeded the study's projection for NIV applicants in 2020 by over 104 percent, and in the same year, China's demand was over 57 percent higher than the study's 2020 projection for it. These increases in demand resulted in longer NIV interview wait times between 2006 and 2011 in Brazil and China. As we have previously reported, increases in NIV demand have historically impacted State's ability to efficiently process visas.²³

Expected increases in NIV demand are further complicated by State's current NIV process, including proposed staffing levels that are not anticipated to rise significantly through fiscal year 2016. Consular officers in 8 of the 11 focus groups and consular management officials at posts in

²³ [GAO-07-847](#).

Beijing, Mexico City, and New Delhi told us that current efforts to reduce NIV interview wait times are not sustainable if demand for NIVs continues to increase at expected rates. A consular management official at one post noted that efforts such as staff increases have been a “temporary fix” but are not a long-term solution to their high volume of NIV applicants. Staffing levels cannot be increased indefinitely due to factors such as hiring restrictions, staffing limitations established by host governments, and physical workspace constraints. For example, according to State officials, State is currently hiring to meet vacancies caused by attrition and is expected to increase the number of consular officers by only 57 in fiscal year 2015, a 3 percent increase, and not increase consular officers in fiscal year 2016. State officials told us that they do not expect significant increases in staffing levels beyond 2016. According to State officials, staffing limitations established by host governments are also a barrier to State’s Bureau of Consular Affairs’ staffing efforts. For example, the Indian government has currently restricted the number of staff the United States can employ at consulates and embassies. Physical capacity limitations, such as insufficient interview windows for visa adjudication, are also a concern for efforts to increase staffing.

State Should Evaluate Its Efforts To Improve NIV Processing Capacity Given Future NIV Demand Projections

According to State officials, efforts implemented since E.O. 13597 have collectively reduced NIV interview wait times. However, the effectiveness of each individual effort remains unclear due to a lack of evaluation. According to GAO’s Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government, internal controls should provide reasonable assurance that the objectives of an agency are being achieved to ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of operations, including the use of the agency’s resources.²⁴ Furthermore, State’s evaluation policy emphasizes the importance of evaluations for bureaus to improve their programs and management processes to inform decision makers about current and future activities.²⁵ The evaluation findings, according to State’s policy, are to then be utilized for making decisions about policy and the delivery of services. State officials acknowledged that they had not completed any

²⁴GAO, *Internal Control: Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, GAO/AIMD-00-21.3.1 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 1999).

²⁵State, *Department of State Evaluation Policy*, <http://www.state.gov/s/d/rm/rls/evaluation/2015/236970.htm> (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 29, 2015).

systematic evaluations of their efforts to reduce NIV interview wait times because they are not currently collecting reliable data. For example, State officials reported that the expansion of the IWP in Brazil has significantly increased their NIV processing capacity and has helped them reach the NIV interview wait times goals of E.O. 13597. However, due to an absence of data, State could not determine how many more cases were adjudicated via the IWP after its expansion and also could not quantify the impact of the expansion on reducing NIV interview wait times in Brazil. Instead, State officials said they relied on the reduction in NIV interview appointment wait times as a general indication that the efforts are working.

Furthermore, projected increases in NIV demand and the goals specified in E.O. 13597 heighten the importance and potential impact of State's efforts to ensure that resources are effectively targeted. A systematic evaluation of efforts by State to reduce NIV interview wait times would provide a clear indication of the efforts that yield the greatest impact on NIV processing efficiency and could assist the agency in continuing to meet the goals of E.O. 13597. Such evaluations would help State allocate resources to those efforts that provide the most impact in efficiently and effectively achieving its objectives. Without such evaluations, State's ability to direct resources to those activities that offer the greatest likelihood of success for continuing to meet the goals of E.O. 13597 is at risk. State officials acknowledged that an evaluation of their efforts to improve NIV processing capacity would be helpful for future decision making.

NIV Processing Systems at Posts Pose Significant Challenges for Consular Officers

Consular officers and managers at posts we visited identified current information technology (IT) systems as one of the most significant challenges to the efficient processing of NIVs. Consular officers in all 11 focus groups we conducted across the four posts we visited stated that problems with the Consular Consolidated Database (CCD) and the NIV system create significant obstacles for consular officers in the processing of NIVs.²⁶ Specifically, consular officers and managers at posts stated

²⁶The NIV system is the primary case management and adjudication system used at overseas posts to review and complete visa adjudication. After collecting visa application information, the data is replicated to CCD, which collects and stores it and facilitates connections with other systems used to cross-reference an applicant's name and biometrics.

that frequent NIV system outages and failures (where the system stops working) at individual posts, worldwide system outages of CCD, and IT systems that are not user friendly, negatively affected their ability to process NIVs.

- **NIV system outages and failures at posts:** Consular officers we spoke with in Beijing, Mexico City, New Delhi, and São Paulo explained that the NIV system regularly stops working. This results in a reduced number of adjudications (whether being performed at the interview window or, for an IWP applicant, at an officer's desk) in a day. Notably, consular officers in 4 of the 11 focus groups reported having to stop work or re-adjudicate NIV applications as a result of these NIV system failures. In fact, during our visit to the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi in March 2015, a local NIV outage occurred, affecting consular officers' ability to conduct adjudications. In January 2015, officers in Bogotá, Guadalajara, Monterrey, and Moscow—among the top 15 posts with the highest NIV applicant volume in 2014—experienced severe NIV performance issues—specifically an inability to perform background check queries against databases.
- **Worldwide outages and operational issues of CCD:** Since July 2014, two worldwide outages of CCD have impaired the ability of posts to process NIV applications. On June 9, 2015, an outage affected the ability of posts to run checks of biometric data, thus halting most visa printing along with other services offered at posts.²⁷ According to State officials, the outage affected every post worldwide for 10 days. The system was gradually repaired, but it was not fully restored at all posts until June 29, 2015, exacerbating already increased NIV interview wait times at some posts during the summer high demand season.

According to State notices, another significant outage of CCD occurred on July 20, 2014, slowing NIV processing worldwide until September 5, 2014, when CCD returned to full operational capacity.²⁸ State estimated that from the start of operational issues on July 20 through late July, State issued approximately 220,000 NIVs globally—about half of the NIVs State anticipated issuing during that period. According to officials in State's Bureau of Consular Affairs, Office of

²⁷ According to State officials, during this outage, consular officers could still adjudicate critical cases such as adoption cases and medical emergencies.

²⁸ State, *Important Notice: Delay in Passport and Visa Processing Times*, September 5, 2014.

Consular Systems and Technology (CST), who are responsible for operating and maintaining CCD and the NIV system, consular officers were still able to collect NIV applicant information during that period; however, processing of applications was significantly delayed with an almost 2-week backlog of NIVs. In the U.S. Consulate in São Paulo, a consular management official reported that due to this outage, the post had a backlog of about 30,000 NIV applications, or approximately 9 days' worth of NIV interviews during peak season. Consular officers in 8 out of the 11 focus groups we conducted identified a lengthy CCD outage as a challenge to the efficient processing of NIVs.

- **IT systems are not user friendly:** In 9 out of 11 focus groups, consular officers described the IT systems for NIV processing as not user friendly. Officers in our focus groups explained that some aspects of the system hinder their ability to quickly and efficiently process NIVs. These aspects include a lack of integration among the databases needed for NIV adjudications, the need for manual scanning of documentation provided by an applicant, and an absence of standard keyboard shortcuts²⁹ across all IT applications that would allow users to quickly copy information when processing NIV applications for related applicants, to avoid having to enter data multiple times. Some consular officers in our focus groups stated that they could adjudicate more NIVs in a day if the IT systems were less cumbersome and more user friendly.

Consular officers in Beijing and Mexico City and consular management at one post indicated that the NIV system appeared to be designed without consideration for the needs of a high volume post, which include efficiently processing a large number of applications per adjudicator each day. According to consular officers, the system is poor at handling today's high levels of demand because it was originally designed in the mid-1990s. Consular officers in São Paulo stated that under current IT systems and programs, the post may not be able to process larger volumes that State projects it will have in the future.

State, recognizing the limits of its current consular IT systems, initiated the development of a new IT platform. State is developing a new system referred to as "ConsularOne," to modernize 92 applications that include systems such as CCD and the NIV system. According to State, ConsularOne will be implemented in six phases, starting with passport

²⁹Keyboard shortcuts are combinations of two or more keys that can be used to perform tasks that would typically require a mouse or other pointing device.

renewal systems and, in phase five, capabilities associated with adjudicating and issuing visas (referred to as non-citizen services). However, CST officials have yet to formally commit to when the capabilities associated with non-citizen services are to be implemented. According to a preliminary CST schedule, the enhanced capabilities associated with processing NIVs are not scheduled for completion until October 2019. Given this timeline, according to State officials, enhancements to existing IT systems are necessary and are being planned.

State Does Not Systematically Obtain End User Input to Prioritize Improvement Efforts for Current IT Systems

Although consular officers and managers we spoke with identified CCD and the NIV system as one of the most significant challenges to the efficient processing of NIVs, State does not systematically measure end user (i.e., consular officers) satisfaction. We have previously reported that in order for IT organizations to be successful, they should measure the satisfaction of their users and take steps to improve it.³⁰ The Software Engineering Institute's IDEALSM model is a recognized approach for managing efforts to make system improvements.³¹ According to this model, user satisfaction should be collected and used to help guide improvement efforts through a written plan. With such an approach, IT improvement resources can be invested in a manner that provides optimal results.

Although State is in the process of upgrading and enhancing CCD and the NIV system, State officials told us that they do not systematically measure user satisfaction with their IT systems and do not have a written plan for improving satisfaction. According to CST officials, consular officers may voluntarily submit requests to CST for proposed IT system enhancements. Additionally, State officials noted that an IT stakeholder group comprising officials in State's Bureau of Consular Affairs regularly meets to identify and prioritize IT resources and can convey end user concerns for the system.³² However, State has not collected

³⁰GAO, *Library of Congress: Strong Leadership Needed to Address Serious Information Technology Management Weaknesses*, [GAO-15-315](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 31, 2015).

³¹IDEALSM is a service mark of Carnegie Mellon University and stands for initiating, diagnosing, establishing, acting, and leveraging. For more information on this model, see *IDEALSM: A User's Guide for Software Process Improvement* (CMU/SEI-96-HB-001).

³²These stakeholders are called business unit system liaisons and are often civil service officers with field experience or Foreign Service Officers.

comprehensive data regarding end user satisfaction and developed a plan to help guide its current improvement efforts. Furthermore, consular officers continued to express concerns with the functionality of the IT systems, and some officers noted that enhancements to date have not been sufficient to address the largest problems they encounter with the systems.

Given consular officers' reliance on IT services provided by CST, as well as the feedback we received from focus groups, it is critical that State identify and implement feedback from end users in a disciplined and structured fashion for current and any future IT upgrades. Without a systematic approach to measure end user satisfaction, CST may not be able to adequately ensure that it is investing its resources on improvement efforts that will improve performance of its current and future IT systems for end users.

Conclusions

Travel and tourism are important contributors to U.S. economic growth and job creation. According to Commerce, international travelers contributed \$220.6 billion to the economy and supported 1.1 million jobs in 2014. Processing visas for such travelers as efficiently and effectively as possible without compromising our national security is critical to maintaining a competitive and secure travel and tourism industry in the United States. Although State has historically struggled with the task of maintaining reasonable wait times for NIV interviews, it has undertaken a number of efforts in recent years that have yielded substantial progress in reducing such waits. Significant projected increases in NIV demand coupled with consular hiring constraints and other challenges could hinder State's ability to sustain this progress in the future—especially in countries where the demand for visas is expected to rise the highest. These challenges heighten the importance of systematically evaluating the cost and impact of the multiple measures State has taken to reduce interview wait times in recent years and leveraging that knowledge in future decision making. Without this, State's ability to direct resources to those activities that offer the greatest likelihood of success is limited. Moreover, State's future capacity to cope with rising NIV demand will be challenged by inefficiencies in its visa processing technology; consular officers and management officials at the posts we visited pointed to cumbersome user procedures and frequent system failures as enormous obstacles to efficient NIV processing. State's Bureau of Consular Affairs recognizes these problems and plans a number of system enhancements; however, the bureau does not systematically collect input from consular officers to help guide and prioritize these planned

upgrades. Without a systematic effort to gain the input of those who employ these systems on a daily basis, State cannot be assured that it is investing its resources in a way that will optimize the performance of these systems for current and future users.

Recommendations for Executive Action

To further improve State's processing of nonimmigrant visas, we recommend that the Secretary of State take the following two actions:

1. Evaluate the relative impact of efforts undertaken to reduce nonimmigrant visa interview wait times to help managers make informed future resource decisions.
2. Document a plan for obtaining end user (i.e., consular officers) input to help improve end user satisfaction and prioritize enhancements to information technology systems.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report for review and comment to State, Commerce, and DHS. We received written comments from State, which are reprinted in appendix II. State agreed with both of our recommendations and highlighted a number of actions it is taking or plans to take to implement them. Commerce and DHS did not provide written comments on the report. State and DHS provided a number of technical comments, which we have incorporated throughout the report, as appropriate.

As agreed with your offices, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution until 30 days from the report date. At that time, we will send copies to the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Commerce, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and other interested parties. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-8980 or courtsm@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last

page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix III.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael J. Courts". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Michael J. Courts
Director, International Affairs and Trade

List of Requesters

The Honorable Mark Kirk
United States Senate

The Honorable Amy Klobuchar
United States Senate

The Honorable Marco Rubio
United States Senate

The Honorable Brian Schatz
United States Senate

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This report reviews Department of State's (State) nonimmigrant visa (NIV) processing operations and provides an update on the status of the goals in Executive Order (E.O.) 13597. Specifically, this report examines (1) the efforts State has undertaken to expand capacity and reduce NIV applicants' interview wait times and the reported results to date, and (2) the challenges that impact State's ability to efficiently process NIVs. To accomplish our objectives, we reviewed relevant State and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) documents, and interviewed State, DHS, and Department of Commerce (Commerce) officials. In addition, we observed consular operations and interviewed U.S. government officials at four posts—the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, China; the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi, India; the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, Mexico; and the U.S. Consulate in São Paulo, Brazil. For our site visits, we selected posts that (1) were in countries specifically mentioned in E.O. 13597, (2) experienced NIV interview wait time problems previously, or (3) were in countries that have the highest levels of U.S. NIV demand in the world. During these visits, we observed visa operations; interviewed consular staff and embassy management about NIV adjudication policies, procedures, and resources; conducted focus groups with consular officers; and reviewed documents and data. Our selection of posts was not intended to provide a generalizable sample but allowed us to observe consular operations at some of the highest NIV demand posts worldwide.

To determine the efforts State has undertaken to expand capacity and reduce NIV applicants' interview wait times, we reviewed relevant documents and interviewed officials from State and DHS. To determine the reported results of those efforts, we collected and analyzed data on NIV processing capacity and NIV interview wait times worldwide from January 2011 until July 2015 and compared them to the goals outlined in E.O. 13597 and reviewed documentation provided by State on their efficiency efforts. For NIV interview wait time data, we focused our analysis on B visas and not on other NIV categories because this is how State measures visa wait times against the goals specified in E.O. 13597, and because B visas represent most NIVs. For example, B visas represent 79 percent of all NIVs processed in fiscal year 2014. To determine the reliability of State's data on NIV wait times for applicant interviews, we reviewed the department's procedures for capturing these data, interviewed the officials in Washington, D.C., who monitor and report these data, and examined data that were provided to us electronically. In addition, we interviewed the corresponding officials from our visits to select posts overseas and in Washington, D.C., who input and use the NIV interview wait time data. While some posts occasionally did not update their NIV wait time data on a weekly basis, we found the

data to be sufficiently reliable for the purposes of determining the percentage of posts that were below the 3-week NIV interview wait time threshold established by E.O. 13597.

To determine the challenges that impact State's ability to efficiently process NIVs, we reviewed relevant documents, including State planning and NIV demand projections, interviewed State, DHS, and Commerce officials in Washington, D.C., including officials from State's Office of Inspector General, and conducted focus groups with consular officers. We also reviewed State's documentation on its information technology systems, including the Consular Consolidated Database, the NIV system, and the development plans for the ConsularOne system. To determine the reliability of State's NIV applicant projections, we reviewed the department's projections and interviewed the officials that develop the projections. We found the data to be sufficiently reliable for the purposes of providing a baseline for possible NIV demand through 2019.

To balance the views of State management and obtain perspectives of consular officers on State's NIV processing, we conducted 11 focus group meetings with randomly selected entry-level consular officers that conduct NIV interviews and adjudications at the four posts we visited. These meetings involved structured small-group discussions designed to gain more in-depth information about specific issues that cannot easily be obtained from single or serial interviews. Consistent with typical focus group methodologies, our design included multiple groups with varying characteristics but some similarity in experience and responsibility. Most groups involved 6 to 10 participants. Discussions were structured, guided by a moderator who used a standardized list of questions to encourage participants to share their thoughts and experiences. Our overall objective in using a focus group approach was to obtain the views, insights, and feelings of entry-level consular officers on issues related to their workload, the NIV process, and challenges they face as consular officers conducting NIV applicant interviews and adjudications. We assured participants of the anonymity of their responses, promising that their names would not be directly linked to their responses. We also conducted one pretest focus group and made some revisions to the focus group guide accordingly.

Methodologically, focus groups are not designed to (1) demonstrate the extent of a problem or to generalize results to a larger population, (2) develop a consensus to arrive at an agreed-upon plan or make decisions about what actions to take, or (3) provide statistically representative samples or reliable quantitative estimates. Instead, they are intended to

generate in-depth information about the reasons for the focus group participants' attitudes on specific topics and to offer insights into their concerns about and support for an issue.

The projectability of the information produced by our focus groups is limited for several reasons. First, the information includes only the responses of entry-level consular officers from the 11 selected groups. Second, participants were asked questions about their specific experiences with the NIV process and challenges they face as consular officers conducting NIV applicant interviews and adjudications. Other entry-level consular officers who did not participate in our focus groups or were located at different posts may have had different experiences. Because of these limitations, we did not rely entirely on focus groups but rather used several different methodologies to corroborate and support our conclusions.

We conducted this performance audit from September 2014 to September 2015 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of State



United States Department of State
Comptroller

Washington, DC 20520

AUG 20 2015

Dr. Loren Yager
Managing Director
International Affairs and Trade
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

Dear Dr. Yager:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "NONIMMIGRANT VISAS: State Has Reduced Applicant Interview Wait Times, but Long-Term Sustainability of Gains Is Uncertain." GAO Job Code 321044.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

If you have any questions concerning this response, please contact Noelle Rush, Management Analyst, Office of the Comptroller, Bureau of Consular Affairs at (202) 485-6697.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Chris H. Flaggs".

Christopher H. Flaggs

Enclosure:
As stated.

cc: GAO – Michael J. Courts
CA – Michele T. Bond
State/OIG - Norman Brown

Department of State Comments on GAO Draft Report

**NONIMMIGRANT VISAS: State Has Reduced Applicant Interview Wait
Times, but Long-Term Sustainability of Gains is Uncertain
(GAO-15-773; GAO Code 321044)**

The Department welcomes this GAO report that recognizes our efforts to meet and exceed the goals of Executive Order 13597. As the report indicates, the Department has developed a multi-pronged approach to meet rising nonimmigrant visa (NIV) demand, including introducing innovative staffing models, expanding facilities, finding more efficient ways to process NIVs, and developing a common business culture and shared management approach within the Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA). The Department also dispatches Consular Management Assistance Teams composed of Washington-based consular experts to assist posts with management challenges and make recommendations on improving operational efficiency. These initiatives have enabled us to successfully meet growing NIV demand, as demonstrated by our success in maintaining wait times that comply with Executive Order 13597.

Recommendation 1: Evaluate the relative impact of efforts undertaken to reduce nonimmigrant visa interview wait times to help managers make informed future resource decisions.

Response to Recommendation 1:

We concur with the recommendation. The Bureau of Consular Affairs has engaged a Senior Advisor to consider the question of retroactive analysis of the relative impact of efforts undertaken to reduce wait times. That retroactive analysis is very likely, however, to be hindered by the fact that we do not have consistent, complete baseline data for officer and window productivity that predates the introduction of various processing innovations. In addition, in many instances we introduced multiple changes to the process simultaneously. For instance, opening offsite biometrics facilities in Mexico at the same time we expanded use of the interview waiver program; as such, we are likely unable to isolate the impact of each measure. Regardless of whether the Department is able to perform a thorough retroactive analysis, we can and will conduct such analysis as we introduce further innovations to consular processes and resources. In addition, we will continue ICA activities like the Metrics Project and the Innovation Forum to share worldwide the level of effort and the impact of specific efforts to improve efficiency and quality of service.

Recommendation 2: Document a plan for obtaining end user (i.e., consular officers) input to help improve end user satisfaction and prioritize enhancements to information technology systems.

Response to Recommendation 2:

We concur with the recommendation. The Bureau of Consular Affairs' Office of Consular Systems and Technology has undertaken the modernization of current systems which will respond to the concerns in the GAO Draft Report. CA must keep pace with the needs of its users and customers in order to continue providing quality services. Most consular systems in use today were built more than a decade ago and were specifically built and updated with only one particular service (e.g., nonimmigrant visas) in mind. A modernized suite of consular applications, ConsularOne, is being designed and built with every consular service in mind. This critical initiative will enable CA to provide more efficient, unified, secure, and consistent services for its users and customers. Additionally, building an integrated system will provide CA with easier maintenance and long-term cost savings.

A common, intuitive user interface along with shared service capabilities will benefit individual employees and CA as a whole. Ultimately, ConsularOne will provide CA employees easier access to data through a standard interface, greatly reducing the need to log into separate systems to obtain needed data. This access to data will allow employees to focus on making decisions and working directly with customers. Furthermore, the common interface will benefit users as they move between services – for example, between passport and visa work – because the look and feel of the interface will not change, creating a nearly seamless experience for the user. Lastly, building a system like ConsularOne will provide a more stable technical environment.

Consular end users play a key role in the development of consular applications. ConsularOne requirements are being collected with extensive input from users. For current systems, suggestions and complaints by users are centrally tracked and then prioritized for developers by the Visa Office for each release. CA is expanding the use of Agile development methodology which will permit more frequent releases, and in which end users will have a more direct role in generating the list of desired functions. In addition, business-side product managers will have more flexibility in reprioritizing these features, and in determining whether the product meets user needs.

Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Michael J. Courts, (202) 512-8980 or courtsm@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the individual mentioned above, Godwin Agbara (Assistant Director, International Affairs and Trade), Kathryn Bernet (Assistant Director, Homeland Security and Justice), Nicholas Marinos (Assistant Director, Information Technology), Ashley Alley, Juan P. Avila, Justin Fisher, Kaelin Kuhn, Jill Lacey, Christopher J. Mulkins, and Jasmine Senior made key contributions to this report. Technical assistance was provided by Karen Deans, Katherine Forsyth, Kara Marshall, and Tina Cheng.

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