



July 2025

# PASSPORT SERVICES

## The National Passport Information Center Has Taken Steps to Meet Customer Needs

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-107409](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

NPIC responds to public inquiries and provides information on passport services and related matters. NPIC is contractor-operated and has four locations—two in Michigan (Grand Rapids and Lansing) and two in Phoenix, Arizona. It is an important touchpoint of the passport process, according to State officials.

In FY 2023, NPIC experienced periods of extremely high call volumes, and customers experienced longer-than-usual wait times to speak to an NPIC call agent. This surge in call volumes coincided with a backlog in passport applications and significant delays in passport issuance that attracted attention from Congress and the public.

The Department of State Authorization Act of 2023 includes a provision for GAO to review NPIC's operations and personalized customer service. This report examines (1) the services NPIC has in place to respond to customer inquiries, (2) customer satisfaction with NPIC services and factors that affected call volume, and (3) changes that NPIC made to meet call volume needs.

To address these objectives, GAO analyzed telecommunication, staffing, and survey data; conducted site visits to two NPIC locations in Michigan (Grand Rapids and Lansing); and interviewed State and contractor officials.

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July 2025

## PASSPORT SERVICES

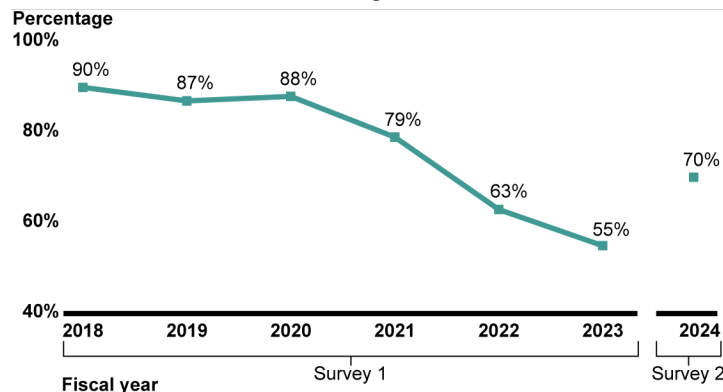
### The National Passport Information Center Has Taken Steps to Meet Customer Needs

## What GAO Found

The Department of State's centralized customer service call center, the National Passport Information Center (NPIC), assists customers by answering general questions about passports, providing passport application assistance, and scheduling urgent passport appointments in circumstances such as life-and-death emergencies. NPIC maintains a toll-free telephone number and an email address for customers with passport-related questions. In addition, NPIC has a dedicated telephone line and email address to assist congressional staffers with similar requests on behalf of their constituents.

Customers who were randomly selected by NPIC and responded to post-call surveys reported decreasing levels of satisfaction between fiscal year (FY) 2018 and FY 2023.

**National Passport Information Center (NPIC) Post-Call Survey Respondents' Overall Customer Satisfaction, Fiscal Year 2018 through Fiscal Year 2024**



Source: GAO analysis of American Customer Satisfaction Index survey data from fiscal year 2018 through fiscal year 2023 and National Passport Information Center survey data from fiscal year 2024. | GAO-25-107409

Note: The figure includes a break in the data because it combines results from two separate NPIC post-call surveys.

NPIC officials identified several factors that affected NPIC's ability to meet customer needs leading up to and during the FY 2023 call surge. These included low staffing capacity, inadequate infrastructure, and misuse of technology systems.

Since the FY 2023 call surge, NPIC has taken steps to address the factors that affected call volume needs. Specifically, NPIC increased its customer service representative (call agent) staffing levels from approximately 500 in FY 2020 to about 1,600 in FY 2024, according to GAO's analysis of NPIC data. In addition, NPIC has increased its physical space by adding two new locations in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Phoenix, Arizona. Further, NPIC has enhanced its technology by adding approximately 7,000 phone lines. Moreover, NPIC call agents are undergoing training to improve their skills in actively listening, displaying empathy, and clearly explaining relevant details and next steps. The data GAO reviewed reflect an improvement in customer response time. In June 2023, the average wait time for callers was approximately 45 minutes; by June 2024, the average wait time for callers had declined to less than a minute.

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### Abbreviations

NPIC	National Passport Information Center
OPR	Online Passport Renewal
Passport Services	Passport Services Directorate
Peckham	Peckham Vocational Industries

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July 8, 2025

## Congressional Committees

The National Passport Information Center (NPIC) is the Department of State's resource for handling urgent passport appointments, responding to public inquiries, and providing information about passport services, among other services.<sup>1</sup> According to State officials, NPIC is a key customer service touchpoint of the passport process. It answered approximately 4.6 million calls in fiscal year (FY) 2024.

In FY 2023, NPIC experienced peak periods of high call volumes, and customers experienced longer-than-usual wait times to speak to an NPIC customer service representative (call agent), which decreased customer satisfaction. During the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, there was a massive disruption in typical international travel patterns and related behaviors. These changes in priorities and behaviors interrupted and delayed American citizens' demand for passport products. In FY 2023, State received 21.6 million applications, nearly 2 million more than it had expected. The FY 2023 surge contributed to a backlog in passport applications and significant delays in passport issuance that caught the attention of Congress and the public and was in part responsible for the high call volume at NPIC.

NPIC's contact volume—the number of customers that request assistance—is affected by State's ability to issue passports consistent with published expected processing times, according to State officials.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the number of passport applications pending approval from passport processing centers combined with the length of time it takes an applicant to receive their passport can affect NPIC's contact volume. Customers generally reach out for assistance when State exceeds expected processing time frames for passports.<sup>3</sup> For example, as a result

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<sup>1</sup>NPIC also responds to inquiries about vital records and authentications services.

<sup>2</sup>The Passport Services Directorate in State's Bureau of Consular Affairs oversees passport operations in headquarters and 27 domestic passport processing and adjudication centers.

<sup>3</sup>We also conducted a review of State's fiscal year 2023 passport processing backlog, which was caused in part by the pent-up demand related to the COVID-19 pandemic and travel restrictions in 2020. See GAO, *State Department Should Identify Milestones and Resource Needs for Its Plans to Avoid Future Delays*, [GAO-25-107164](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 27, 2025).

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of the surge of passport applications at State in the third quarter (April – June) of FY 2023, NPIC answered approximately 2.6 million customer calls, compared with about 1.2 million customer calls in the third quarter of FY 2024.

The Department of State Authorization Act of 2023 includes a provision for us to review NPIC’s operations and personalized customer service.<sup>4</sup> This report examines (1) the services NPIC has in place to respond to customer inquiries, (2) customer satisfaction with NPIC services and factors that affected call volume, and (3) changes that NPIC has recently made to meet call volume needs.<sup>5</sup>

To examine the services NPIC has in place to respond to customer inquiries, we collected and reviewed documents from State’s Bureau of Consular Affairs and met with bureau officials and contractor representatives. We also reviewed contract documentation on services NPIC has in place. To examine customer satisfaction with NPIC services, we analyzed customer satisfaction survey data from FY 2018 through FY 2024 to identify changes during this period. To examine factors that affected NPIC call volume and changes that NPIC has recently made to meet call volume needs, we reviewed State’s contract with Peckham Vocational Industries (Peckham) for call center services and policies. We also analyzed State and contractor data and other documentation on staffing, retention, call volume, and wait times from FY 2016 through FY 2024 to identify changes prior to and following the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as during the FY 2023 surge. For example, for staffing, we analyzed Peckham employment information for NPIC contract staff, such as the number of employees by job category and call center location by month and year. For retention, we analyzed data on staff hiring, transfers, and terminations. For call volume, we analyzed telecommunications data including call volume, customer wait times, telephone response time, and abandoned calls.

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<sup>4</sup>Pub. L. No. 118-31, Div. F, § 6105, 137 Stat. 136, 966 (2023). For the purposes of our reporting objectives, we define the term “personalized customer service” as customers’ experiences as they engage with NPIC’s efforts to address customer requests and manage call center capacity.

<sup>5</sup>For the purposes of our reporting objectives, we define the term “call center capacity” as NPIC’s (1) ability to leverage staffing and retention, technology, infrastructure, and training; and (2) ability to address fluctuations in call volume to respond to customer requests.

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To assess the reliability of these data, we conducted electronic testing and manual checks to test the validity of State's data and interviewed State and NPIC officials. For example, we electronically tested for missing data, outliers, and obvious errors. We determined that the staffing and survey data were sufficiently reliable for our purposes. As part of our review, we identified discrepancies in the call volume data that were attributable to how the data were archived. In particular, we learned from NPIC officials that summary call volume data were deleted from the source system after approximately 18 months and only manually transcribed Excel reports were saved. We assessed the impact of the discrepancies and determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purpose of the aggregate totals and general trends included in this report.

To address all three objectives, we met with officials from State's Bureau of Consular Affairs and NPIC contractor representatives to discuss services, capacity, and performance. We also conducted site visits at two call centers located in Michigan (Lansing and Grand Rapids) and the Passport Processing Center in Detroit, Michigan. We chose these locations on the basis of factors that included newness of the facility, relative distance, and proximity to a passport processing center location. During these site visits, we met with State officials and contractor representatives, including leadership and call agents; toured the facilities; and observed eight listening sessions of customer calls with call agents.

We conducted this performance audit from February 2024 to July 2025 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.

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## Background

NPIC is operated by Peckham, a U.S. government contractor.<sup>6</sup> Peckham became the prime contractor of NPIC in FY 2008 and assumed responsibility for all NPIC services, including staff training, in FY 2013. In FY 2019, State again awarded Peckham the NPIC contract through the AbilityOne program for a period of performance from FY 2019 through FY 2024. In FY 2025, State awarded Peckham a 1-year bridge contract to

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<sup>6</sup>Peckham is an AbilityOne non-profit organization that provides numerous services for the federal government, including call centers for other federal agencies. AbilityOne programs provide employment opportunities for people who are blind or have significant disabilities.

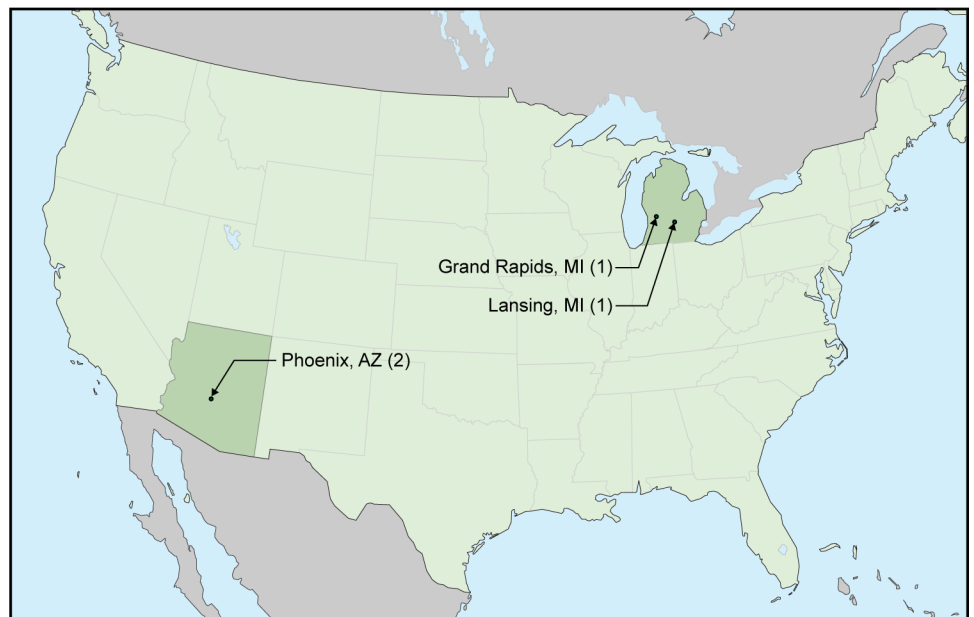
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continue operating NPIC while State recompeted the follow-on contract procurement, according to officials.<sup>7</sup>

State's Bureau of Consular Affairs funds NPIC through fees it collects for services, such as issuing passports and visas, according to State officials. In FY 2024, State's Bureau of Consular Affairs collected approximately \$5.8 billion in fees and obligated about \$86 million under the bridge contract with Peckham for NPIC, according to State officials.

NPIC has four call center locations: one in Grand Rapids, Michigan; one in Lansing, Michigan; and two in Phoenix, Arizona (see fig. 1).

**Figure 1: Locations of the National Passport Information Center's Call Centers**



Source: GAO (data); Map Resources (map). | GAO-25-107409

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<sup>7</sup>In a previous report, we found that when a contract is set to expire and there is a continuing need for services, but the follow-on contract is not ready to be awarded, the government can extend the existing contract or award a short-term sole-source contract to an incumbent contractor. These types of contracting arrangements have been referred to as "bridge contracts" and are used to ensure there is no gap in services. See GAO, *Defining and Tracking Bridge Contracts Would Help Agencies Manage Their Use*, [GAO-16-15](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 14, 2015).



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In State's Bureau of Consular Affairs, the Passport Services Directorate (Passport Services) manages passport operations in headquarters and at 27 domestic passport processing and adjudication centers across the U.S.<sup>8</sup> The Customer Service Division of Passport Services' Office of Program Management and Operational Support is responsible for the operational oversight of NPIC.<sup>9</sup>

State's Bureau of Consular Affairs has been identified as a High Impact Service provider—a federal entity that provides or funds high-impact customer-facing services.<sup>10</sup> As of November 2024, State was participating in a government-wide effort to improve customer experience. State's Bureau of Consular Affairs created its Customer Experience Initiative in January 2023 to oversee the High Impact Service provider effort.

In addition, as of March 2025, State was developing a long-term plan to reduce the likelihood of future passport processing delays, known as the Transformation Roadmap. The roadmap lays out State's plans to increase efficiencies and avoid future processing delays and defines a strategic goal of reducing processing times. We previously reviewed the roadmap and found that it did not identify milestones or resource needs for all its projects. We recommended that State define milestones and determine the resources needed to successfully implement this plan.

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<sup>8</sup>U.S. citizens submit passport applications to State by mail, online, or in person. In the adjudication process, a passport specialist examines each application to determine whether the applicant should receive a passport. State officials adjudicate passports primarily at passport agencies and centers. Passport agencies are smaller, local branches that handle in-person applicants and smaller volumes of applications, while passport centers deal with larger volumes of applications.

<sup>9</sup>In addition, the Passport Services Office of Planning and Program Support is responsible for NPIC contract administration, including programmatic management, and the Office of Procurement Executive Acquisitions is generally responsible for contract execution.

<sup>10</sup>A High Impact Service provider is a federal entity, as designated by the Office of Management and Budget, that provides or funds customer-facing services, including federal services administered at the state or local level, that have a high impact on the public, whether because of a large customer base or a critical effect on those served. Exec. Order No. 14058, 86 Fed. Reg. 71357 (Dec. 16, 2021). A High Impact Service provider may be a federal department or a component of a department. In November 2021, under the Biden administration, the Office of Management and Budget released the President's Management Agenda, which includes a priority to deliver "excellent, equitable, and secure federal services and customer experience." As of March 2025, this effort was ongoing. For more information on this effort, see GAO, *OMB Has Taken Actions to Implement Cross-Agency Priority Goals*, [GAO-24-106632](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 6, 2024).

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State agreed with our recommendations.<sup>11</sup> These wider efforts and the NPIC-specific steps discussed below are necessary to meet future needs during surges such as the one that occurred in FY 2023, according to NPIC officials.

NPIC's main call center duties are carried out by call agents. NPIC call agents fall into two main categories:

**General Information call agents.** Call agents are hired as General Information call agents until they have been approved following a background investigation.<sup>12</sup> This approval enables the agents to work with sensitive information in passport applications and is necessary for promotion to Applicant call agent. General Information call agents provide information to customers about passport application policies, procedures, and requirements. For example, these agents inform callers about documentation to include in a passport application.

**Applicant call agents.** Applicant call agents have more specialized knowledge than General Information call agents and can schedule appointments at passport processing centers for customers with applications in process or customers who have life-or-death situations or travel needs within 72 hours. In addition, Applicant call agents can view applications in process to assist with requests such as status checks, data corrections, and updates. For example, Applicant call agents can assist with customers' time-sensitive requests, such as changing an address on an application, making other data corrections, or addressing congressional requests on behalf of constituents about their application status.

In addition, two State employees currently work onsite at two of the call center locations, one each at Lansing and Phoenix, to enhance oversight and coordination between NPIC and State.

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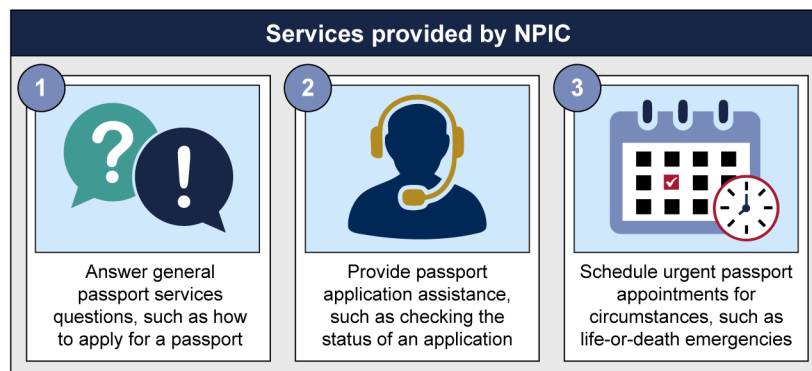
<sup>11</sup>For more information, see [GAO-25-107164](#).

<sup>12</sup>Call agents undergo a Moderate Risk Public Trust investigation, a lower-level background check that allows individuals to work with information in passport applications and handle customers' private personal information but does not require access to classified national security information. The Moderate Risk Public Trust is not categorized as a national security clearance.

## NPIC Answers General Questions, Provides Application Assistance, and Schedules Passport Appointments

NPIC assists customers by answering general questions about passports, such as how to apply for a passport; providing passport application assistance, such as checking the status of an application; and scheduling urgent passport appointments for travel, such as for life-or-death emergencies, as shown in figure 2. These services are key to responding to NPIC customer needs. NPIC officials told us that while passport processing generally took 4 to 6 weeks as of June 2024, customers calling NPIC for updates on their passport status typically call around the fourth week.<sup>13</sup> Although NPIC responds to email inquiries, the vast majority of NPIC services are provided via telephone. NPIC officials told us that most customers prefer to call, especially if they have urgent needs. In addition, NPIC has a State-supported dedicated telephone line and email address for congressional staffers to check the status of active applications, request assistance with applications, and request appointments on behalf of constituents. NPIC services are offered in both English and Spanish.<sup>14</sup>

**Figure 2: Services Offered by the National Passport Information Center (NPIC)**



Sources: GAO (data); GAO (icons). | GAO-25-107409

<sup>13</sup>In our previous work, we found that State's website provides the public with estimates of the length of time required to process a passport application, which State refers to as the service commitment time frame. As demand for passports fluctuates during the year, State may adjust the time frame to reflect these changes. For more information, see [GAO-25-107164](#).

<sup>14</sup>NPIC's congressional phone line and email are only available in English, according to NPIC officials.

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## NPIC Answers General Questions About Passports

NPIC provides customers with general information, such as how to apply for a passport, renew a passport, or report a lost or stolen passport, according to NPIC officials. NPIC officials told us NPIC serves as a hub for customers who choose to speak to a call agent instead of obtaining information online.<sup>15</sup>

NPIC's General Information call agents also provide information about State's new Online Passport Renewal (OPR) process to qualified customers, according to State officials.<sup>16</sup> Launched in September 2024, OPR allows U.S. citizens to renew their passports online instead of via paper-based applications submitted through the postal service. To coincide with the launch of OPR, NPIC incorporated OPR Technical Support in the call routing menu of its toll-free number, according to NPIC officials. Of the approximately 1,800 staff at NPIC as of September 2024, over 100 were dedicated to the OPR technical support desk, serving as call agents to assist customers with OPR-related questions, according to NPIC officials and our analysis of NPIC data.

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## NPIC Assists with Active Passport Applications

NPIC Applicant call agents assist customers who have an active passport application. This assistance can include responding to inquiries about changing the address on an application, checking on the status of an application, or asking when passport processing centers will return supporting documents, according to NPIC officials.

For example, during a listening session with Applicant call agents, we heard a customer call that involved an inquiry related to a missing middle name on their new passport and a request to correct the error. The Applicant call agent identified a correction form for the customer to fill out and provided the mailing address to which it should be sent. In addition, we heard a customer calling NPIC because the passport agency had sent a letter requesting their birth certificate, although the customer had sent in that document with their original application. The call agent searched for the customer's information in the passport system and told the customer they likely had received the request because they had provided a very worn and unreadable copy of their birth certificate. The call agent advised

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<sup>15</sup>State also publishes general information about passports on its website: <https://travel.state.gov>.

<sup>16</sup>Online Passport Renewal is State's online tool for use by qualified customers to renew their passports. Qualified customers must meet criteria such as being 25 years or older, having a passport that is expiring within 1 year or that expired less than 5 years ago, and applying for the issuance of a regular (tourist) passport, according to State.

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the customer to resubmit a clearer copy of the document so that the passport agency could finish processing their application.

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### NPIC Schedules Urgent Appointments for Passports

NPIC schedules appointments at passport processing centers for customers with urgent travel needs (e.g., life-or-death emergencies).<sup>17</sup> For example, a pilot called during one of our listening sessions, requesting an urgent appointment to renew their expiring passport before leaving the country for work travel. The call agent collected the necessary information from the customer and scheduled an appointment to renew their passport before their travel date. In addition, customers who have not applied for a passport and are traveling within 2 weeks with no special circumstances can use the Online Passport Appointment System available on State's website, according to State officials.

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### Low Customer Satisfaction Results in FY 2023 Were Potentially Related to NPIC's Staffing, Infrastructure, and Technology

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#### Survey Respondents' Satisfaction Declined to 55 Percent in FY 2023 but Improved in FY 2024

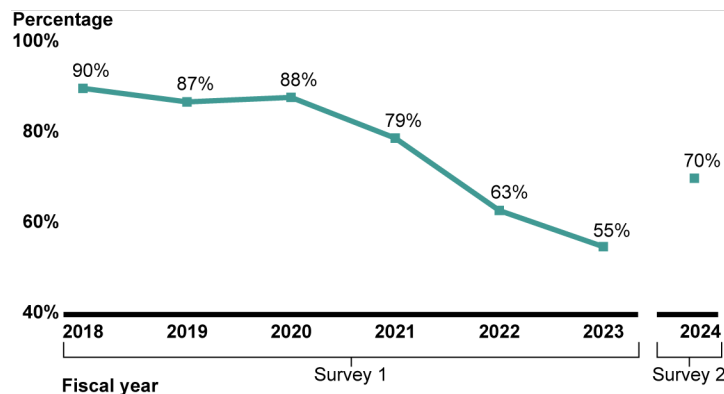
Customers who were selected and responded to post-call surveys reported decreasing levels of satisfaction between FY 2018 and FY 2023. During this period, State used an automated post-call survey called the

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<sup>17</sup>NPIC call agents can schedule non-urgent appointments for some situations, although this is not a main service. Situations that warrant non-urgent appointments include student travel, humanitarian or medical situations, and submitting a passport to a foreign embassy to obtain a visa, according to NPIC officials. Customers also have the option to schedule appointments through NPIC's online appointment scheduling system without having to speak to an NPIC call agent.

American Customer Satisfaction Index to gauge customer satisfaction.<sup>18</sup> According to post-call survey results, respondents' overall satisfaction was relatively high in FY 2018 through FY 2020, with a satisfaction rate of 87 percent to 90 percent. However, overall satisfaction declined from FY 2021 through FY 2023, with a satisfaction rate of 79 percent in FY 2021, 63 percent in FY 2022, and 55 percent in FY 2023. Overall satisfaction exceeded 70 percent in FY 2024 (see fig. 3).

**Figure 3: National Passport Information Center (NPIC) Post-Call Survey Respondents' Overall Customer Satisfaction, Fiscal Years 2018–2024**



Source: GAO analysis of American Customer Satisfaction Index survey data from fiscal year 2018 through fiscal year 2023 and National Passport Information Center survey data from fiscal year 2024. | GAO-25-107409

Note: The figure includes a break in the data because it combines results from two separate NPIC post-call surveys.

The NPIC post-call survey results indicate that in FY 2024, over 70 percent of callers who completed the survey responded "somewhat agree or strongly agree" to six prompts. The six prompts are the following:

- This experience was what I consider to be ideal.
- It took a reasonable amount of time to be connected to a customer service representative.
- The call center representative I spoke with was knowledgeable and professional.
- It was easy to understand what I needed to do next.
- My needs were met through this conversation.

<sup>18</sup>A third-party vendor administered the survey on behalf of State to 20 percent of callers, about 5 percent of whom responded each year. Survey results represent satisfaction levels only for those who responded and are not generalizable to all customers. The survey was available in English and Spanish. The survey used the American Customer Satisfaction Index's proprietary satisfaction index, the Customer Satisfaction Index. The Customer Satisfaction Index measured overall customer satisfaction, customer satisfaction compared to customer expectations, and customer satisfaction compared to an "ideal" organization. It also included questions about the purpose of the call, the automated call menu, call hold and wait time, experience with the call agent, and exposure to State's travel website.

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- The interaction increased my trust in the Department of State's Passport Services.

Respondents had the lowest overall satisfaction rate in FY 2023, coinciding with the FY 2023 call surge. Satisfaction with call wait time decreased from about 93 percent in FY 2018 to less than 50 percent in FY 2023, while satisfaction with the knowledgeability of call agents who responded to questions decreased from about 92 percent in FY 2018 to 66 percent in FY 2023.

In late FY 2023 and early FY 2024, State contracted Peckham to conduct the post-call survey, according to agency officials. Working with an industry customer experience group, Peckham revised the post-call survey in FY 2023 and constructed a new one to ensure that the questions reflected efforts being implemented to improve the customer experience, according to Peckham officials. Peckham's changes included developing a new methodology related to the customer satisfaction scale and new questions to reflect that methodology, using a Likert rating scale.<sup>19</sup> The overall purpose of NPIC's updated post-call survey remained the same.<sup>20</sup>

Since October 2023, NPIC customers have been prompted to respond to the following six statements using the Likert rating scale:<sup>21</sup>

- This experience was what I consider to be ideal.
- It took a reasonable amount of time to be connected to a customer service representative.
- The call center representative I spoke with was knowledgeable and professional.
- It was easy to understand what I needed to do next.
- My needs were met through this conversation.

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<sup>19</sup>A Likert scale is a rating system that allows respondents to express a range of opinions through five response options that range from strong agreement to strong disagreement and include a neutral option.

<sup>20</sup>As with its previous post-call survey, NPIC administers this survey randomly to 20 percent of callers and seeks a 5 percent response rate. The survey is offered to customers in either English or Spanish.

<sup>21</sup>A seventh prompt asks respondents the following yes/no question: "I went to the Department of State website, <https://www.travel.state.gov>, before I called for help."

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- The interaction increased my trust in the Department of State's Passport Services.

NPIC's post-call survey results indicate that in FY 2024, over 70 percent of callers who completed the survey responded "somewhat agree or strongly agree" to the first six prompts. This score is 20 points lower than it was for callers who completed NPIC's prior survey in 2018. For example, 79 percent of respondents "somewhat agree or strongly agree" that the NPIC call experience was ideal, and 85 percent of respondents "somewhat agree or strongly agree" that the call agent was knowledgeable and professional. To ensure customer needs are being met, NPIC measures telecommunication services through performance metrics in its contract with State (see app. I).

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#### Factors Related to Staffing, Infrastructure, and Customer Misuse of Technology Affected NPIC's Performance

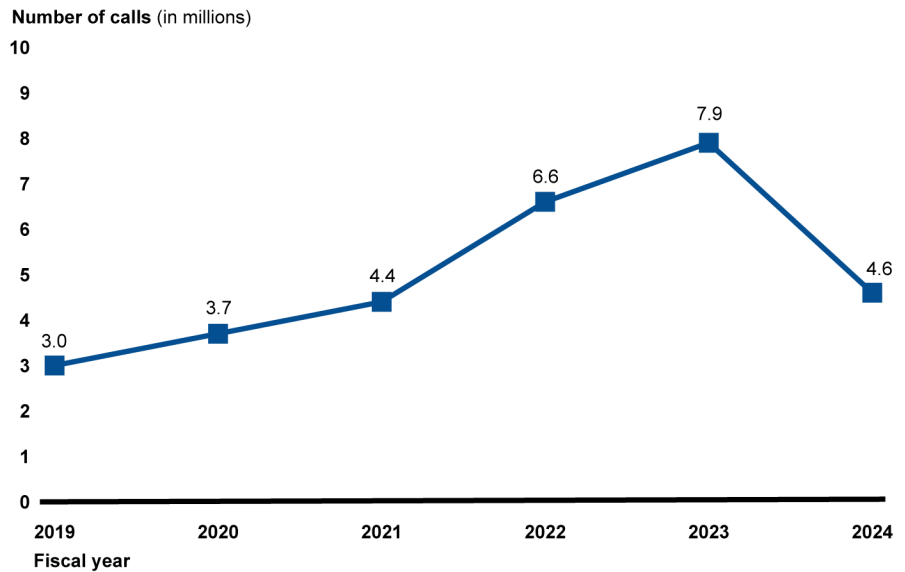
Low staffing capacity, inadequate infrastructure, and customer misuse of technology leading up to and during the FY 2023 surge affected NPIC's ability to handle high call volume, according to NPIC officials. NPIC's call volume grew steadily from FY 2019 to 2023. It answered approximately 4 million calls in FY 2021 compared with almost 8 million calls in FY 2023 (see fig. 4).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Fiscal year 2019 data are incomplete because data from only April through September of that fiscal year are available.



**Figure 4: Number of Calls Answered by National Passport Information Center Call Agents, Fiscal Years 2019–2024**



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data. | GAO-25-107409

Note: Fiscal year 2019 data are incomplete because data from only April through September of that fiscal year are available. Data from July 2021 are not included due to discrepancies. However, the overall trend in the figure is not affected.

From FY 2021 to FY 2023, NPIC experienced increased call volume because of longer than anticipated passport processing times, which affected its ability to assist customers, according to NPIC officials. In our previous work, we found that by the end of FY 2023, State had received 21.6 million passport applications, according to State data. Officials we spoke with attributed this influx to pent-up demand from FY 2020, when State anticipated millions more applications than it received. Specifically, about 10.6 million people that State anticipated would apply to renew their passports (on the basis of passport expiration dates) did not do so, likely because of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to State officials. As a result, many applicants submitted applications later than expected, adding to the normal influx of new passport applications. With a persisting shortage of passport specialists and pent-up demand from FY 2020, passport processing times in FY 2023 exceeded service commitment time

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frames and added to NPIC's call volume, according to State officials.<sup>23</sup> NPIC's call volume increased because of passport application processing delays, according to NPIC officials. Call volume continued to grow steadily until its peak in FY 2023.

## Staffing Challenges

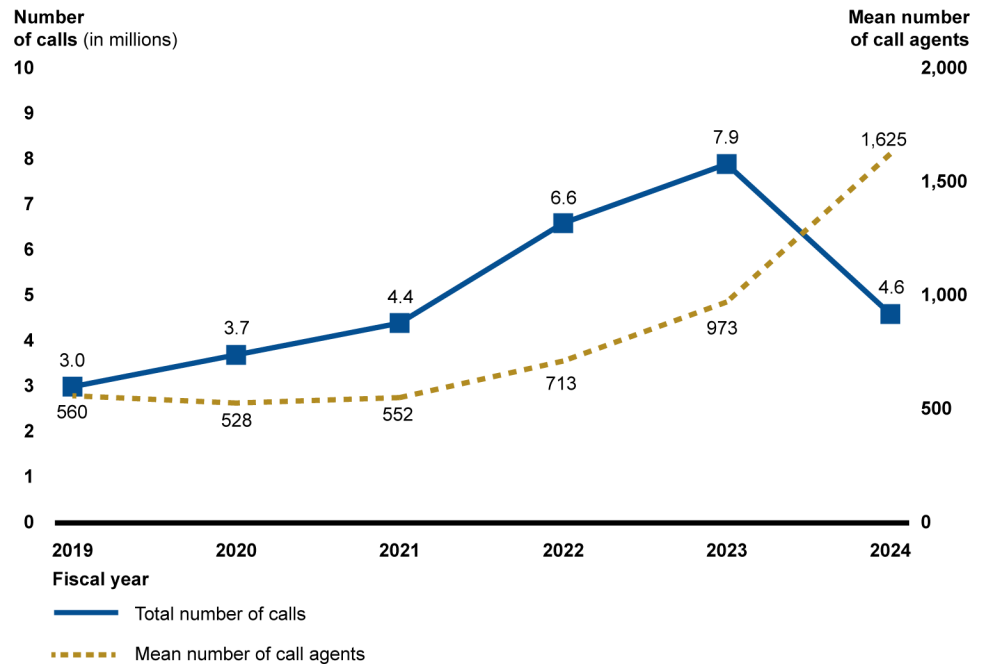
**Increased staff workload.** The increase in NPIC's call volume, which began in 2021, increased call agents' workload. During the FY 2023 call surge, NPIC officials directed call agents to work mandatory overtime, requiring them to work as late as 3 a.m. to help clear phone queues, according to NPIC officials. Call agents told us that in the days prior to the FY 2023 call surge they would answer about 45 to 50 customer calls in a day, but during the surge they were answering over 100 customer calls a day. In FY 2023, about 1,000 call agents answered about 8 million calls, according to our analysis of NPIC data (see fig. 5).<sup>24</sup> Some call agents told us that the call center was so busy they did not have time for basic biological needs, such as drinking water to stay hydrated. One call agent described being hospitalized for stress.

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<sup>23</sup>Additionally, we previously reported that a hiring freeze, which began in 2017 and ended in 2018, prevented Passport Services from hiring and training the needed number of passport specialists. After the hiring freeze was lifted in May 2018, State was unable to hire passport specialists at the rate necessary to meet staffing needs because attrition outpaced onboarding. For more information, see [GAO-25-107164](#).

<sup>24</sup>Fiscal year 2019 data are incomplete because data from only April through September of that fiscal year are available.

**Figure 5: Number of Calls Answered by National Passport Information Center Call Agents and Mean Number of Call Agents, Fiscal Years 2019–2024**



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data. | GAO-25-107409

Note: Fiscal year 2019 data are incomplete because data from only April through September of that fiscal year are available. Data from July 2021 are not included due to discrepancies. However, the overall trend in the figure is not affected.

**Background investigation delays.** During the FY 2023 call surge, a backlog in medical review appointments for call agents caused delays in their background investigations and hampered their ability to train as Applicant call agents, according to NPIC officials. As discussed above, call agents must have a positive Moderate Risk Public Trust clearance before they can begin working as Applicant call agents. Maintaining a sufficient number of Applicant call agents is important because more than half of the calls received must be routed to Applicant call agents. For example, our analysis of NPIC data showed that in FY 2024, 2.5 million calls were routed to Applicant call agents, while 2 million were routed to General Information call agents. Upon hire and before any training begins, NPIC immediately begins the investigation process for each call agent because the process can take several months to 2 years, according to NPIC officials. As part of the process, some call agents must obtain a medical clearance from a State-approved doctor, according to NPIC officials.

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**Increase in congressional calls.** During the FY 2023 call surge, an increased volume of congressional calls required NPIC to augment staffing for these types of calls. At the peak of the FY 2023 call surge, NPIC needed substantially more Applicant call agents to manage the influx of congressional calls, according to NPIC officials. For example, NPIC received approximately 300 congressional calls in June 2019, compared with about 12,000 congressional calls in June 2023, according to our analysis of NPIC data.

## Infrastructure Challenges

Call agents must perform their duties in a secure space because of the sensitive nature of some calls, and NPIC faced physical space constraints in 2023. In particular, NPIC ran out of space in its call center, even as the increased call volume created a need for additional space for both call agents and phone lines. For example, NPIC's former Phoenix, Arizona, location did not have sufficient space and could no longer be expanded to meet the demand for Applicant call agents, according to NPIC officials. As a result, NPIC did not have enough secure space for its call agents to respond to customer calls.<sup>25</sup>

## Customer Misuse of Technology

During the FY 2023 call surge, NPIC experienced higher call volume because of customer misuse of its online system for booking passport processing appointments, according to passport agency officials. The passport appointment system allowed individuals to schedule appointments for passport processing at passport agencies. NPIC call agents could also schedule appointments for customers. However, during the FY 2023 passport backlog, passport appointments became scarce because of increased demand. The scarcity of appointments for customers with urgent travel needs significantly increased NPIC contact volume as customers repeatedly attempted to book the few available appointments, according to NPIC officials. In addition, some individuals took advantage of the system by booking multiple appointments and selling them fraudulently on social media sites, according to State officials. These issues contributed to the scarcity of appointments for passport processing. As a result, customers called NPIC multiple times with questions related to online appointment booking and reported showing up for appointments that did not exist, according to NPIC officials. The scarcity of appointments adversely affected NPIC's ability to schedule customer appointments for passport processing.

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<sup>25</sup>All NPIC sites must be able to meet State's Diplomatic Security requirements for access controls, surveillance systems, and physical boundary protection, according to NPIC officials. Call agents are not eligible for telework, according to NPIC officials.

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## NPIC Has Taken Steps to Increase Customer Satisfaction

NPIC has taken steps to expand staffing capacity, infrastructure, and technology to meet customer needs. Specifically, NPIC has improved staffing capacity and work processes. Additionally, NPIC has improved its infrastructure and technology by adding facility space and phone lines and updating systems such as its online appointment booking system. NPIC has also adjusted its training and evaluation process to meet customer needs.

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## NPIC Improved Staffing Capacity and Call Agent Work Processes During and After the FY 2023 Call Surge

NPIC expanded staffing capacity and improved call agent work processes during the FY 2023 call surge by increasing staffing capacity from FY 2020 to FY 2024, streamlining work processes, increasing pay for call agents, and addressing background investigation delays.

Prior to the FY 2023 call surge, NPIC relied on passport demand forecasts to predict its call volume and determine staffing needs, including for hiring seasonal workers, according to NPIC officials.<sup>26</sup> However, previous forecasts could not adequately predict the unprecedented increases in call volume during the FY 2023 call surge, according to the officials. Specifically, in FY 2023, NPIC's call volume increased because of fluctuations in passport demand, delayed passport processing times, and the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on international travel, according to the officials.

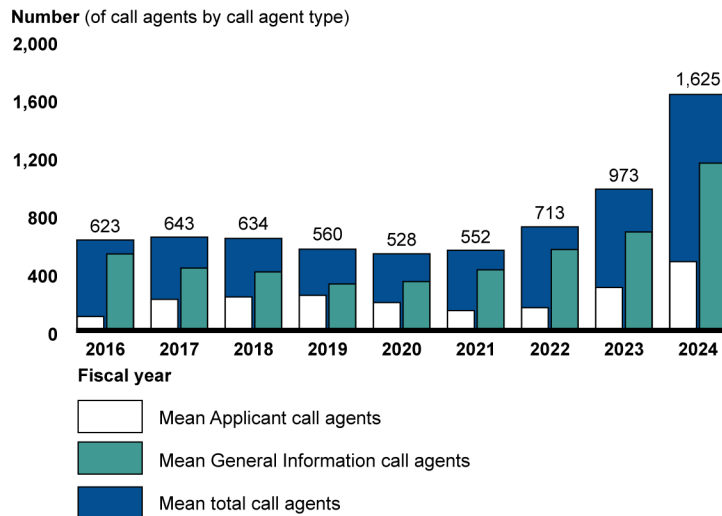
In response to increased demand, NPIC increased its staffing levels and thereby its capacity to address larger fluctuations in call volume. In FY 2024, NPIC had more than 1,600 call agent employees, compared with just over 500 call agent employees in FY 2020 (see fig. 6).<sup>27</sup> With more than 1,000 additional employees, NPIC answered almost a million more calls in FY 2024. In September 2024, NPIC averaged 473 Applicant call agents and 1,152 General Information call agents, according to our analysis of NPIC data.

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<sup>26</sup>Generally, NPIC's call volume varies with fluctuations in passport application volume but is primarily driven by whether passport products are being delivered within published timelines, according to NPIC officials.

<sup>27</sup>NPIC officials noted that seasonal employees are hired and terminated each year. Peckham makes the determination on staffing to meet State's projection of demand for passports.

**Figure 6: Mean Number of National Passport Information Center Call Agents, Fiscal Years 2016–2024**



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data. | GAO-25-107409

Note: The data in this figure include call agents that NPIC hires and terminates seasonally each year.

To help address the increased call volume, NPIC also changed some of its operations. For example, NPIC expanded weekend hours, automated frequently asked questions, narrowed down processing steps in customer assistance procedures, and reduced training timelines (from 7 weeks to 4 weeks) for new call agents, according to NPIC officials.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, in FY 2023, NPIC trained over 100 Peckham staff members—including IT workers and Human Resource staff—to answer calls, according to NPIC officials.

NPIC also increased call agent pay and updated background investigation processes. For example, NPIC worked with State to raise the starting pay rate for call agents from about \$12 an hour to about \$18 an hour, according to NPIC officials. Some factors that drove this change included the significant shift in call agent responsibilities and the psychological demands of the position, according to NPIC officials. Additionally, to help address the backlog in medical reviews for call agents' Moderate Risk Public Trust investigations, State dedicated a State-approved doctor to review NPIC cases, according to State officials.

<sup>28</sup>During this time, but not currently, NPIC's call routing system would provide answers to frequently asked questions, instead of a live call agent speaking to customers, according to NPIC officials.

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Allocating a single doctor's time helped streamline the medical review process.

Call agents with whom we spoke told us their morale had improved since the end of the FY 2023 call surge. They said they had more time to dedicate to each call and more time in between calls since the call volume had decreased. They also said they now felt that they could be more helpful to customers because they had more time to pay attention to details.

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## NPIC Has Enhanced Its Infrastructure and Technology to Meet Capacity Needs

### Infrastructure

NPIC has grown physically to meet its capacity needs, adding two new call center facilities to the existing ones in Lansing, Michigan, and Phoenix, Arizona—one in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and another in Phoenix, Arizona, in December 2022 and December 2023, respectively.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, NPIC relocated its Phoenix facility to another nearby call center facility with additional call agent seating space in November 2024. NPIC officials described the capacity of the call center facilities in Grand Rapids and Lansing during our site visits to those locations. As of September 2024, the Grand Rapids call center facility was composed of two call rooms on the first floor, each with the capacity for about 45 Applicant call agents to handle specialty calls including congressional calls, calls from customers traveling within 72 hours, and life-or-death emergency calls. The second floor, for General Information call agents, had about 200 cubicles with a phone and two monitors. It was renovated within a year of opening to make more space for call agents on the second floor, according to NPIC officials. As of September 2024, the Lansing call center facility had a similar setup as the Grand Rapids facility. The first two floors of the building provided room for about 200 General Information call agents, and the first floor housed about 340 Applicant call agents. Each call agent had a cubicle equipped with a phone and two monitors (see fig. 7).

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<sup>29</sup>NPIC opened the Lansing, Michigan, and original Phoenix, Arizona, locations in April 2006 and December 2008, respectively.

**Figure 7: National Passport Information Center Call Room in Lansing, Michigan**



Source: GAO. | GAO-25-107409

## Technology

Prior to and during the FY 2023 call surge, NPIC added phone lines and other technology enhancements to improve its capacity, according to NPIC officials.

**Additional phone lines.** As of fall 2024, NPIC had added approximately 7,000 phone lines, resulting in a capacity of approximately 9,000 phone lines (with the ability to use virtual phone lines for up to 14,000 simultaneous calls if needed), according to NPIC officials. Before the peak of the FY 2023 call surge, NPIC had approximately 2,000 phone lines.

**Call-back assist feature.** NPIC expanded its call-back assist feature in March 2023, according to NPIC officials. This feature allows customers to save their place in line and receive a call back from the call center when it is their turn to speak with a call agent. According to NPIC officials, the call-back assist feature has increased caller capacity from just over 100 simultaneous calls since June 2016 to over 1,000 simultaneous calls in March 2023. This feature allows for better management of high call volume.



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Since NPIC instituted these changes and improvements to its technology, the average wait time for callers has decreased. For example, in June 2023, the average wait time for callers was approximately 45 minutes; in June 2024, the average wait time for callers had declined to less than a minute, according to our analysis of NPIC data.

**Appointment booking system updates.** NPIC also made three changes to improve its appointment booking for customers. First, NPIC added two-factor authentication to its online appointment system, according to State officials. This change allowed only one phone number to be attached to one appointment, which prevented customers from booking multiple appointment slots using the same number. One official at a passport agency told us that two-factor authentication helped decrease the appointment no-show rate from 26 percent to 20 percent. Second, to combat the reselling of appointments, State and NPIC added customer verification measures so that once an appointment is scheduled, it cannot be changed to another person, according to NPIC officials. Third, NPIC adopted automated texting for appointment reminders to help decrease appointment no-shows, according to the officials. By reducing multiple appointments and no-shows, NPIC potentially made more appointments slots available to better serve customers.

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## NPIC Has Continued to Offer Training, Resources, and Ongoing Evaluations to Help Staff Meet Customer Needs

### Training and Resources

NPIC provides comprehensive training and resources to help call agent staff meet customer needs.

**Initial onboarding training.** NPIC provides initial training for General Information and Applicant call agents. All call agents begin as General Information call agents and undergo 4 weeks of initial in-person training, according to NPIC officials. During their first week of employment, call agents receive an orientation to Peckham and NPIC. NPIC then provides call agents with 2 weeks of core training on passport processes and

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procedures as well as customer service skills.<sup>30</sup> This training covers topics such as lost or stolen passports, damaged passports, and procedures for airline crew members. All call agents' initial training concludes with 2 weeks of mentorship and certification, which involves the new call agent observing and listening to the mentor answer calls in the call center through connected headsets. Call agents told us that these mentoring sessions helped them feel prepared to respond to customers' inquiries.

**Additional training for specialty calls.** Applicant call agents (i.e., call agents who have received a positive Moderate Risk Public Trust determination) complete an additional 2 weeks of training on topics such as assistance to correct data errors in passport books or cards, adding a new passport book or card, and correcting printing errors, according to NPIC officials. These call agents also receive an additional week of mentorship and certifications. Call agents who wish to cover specialty skills such as congressional calls complete additional training.

**Local passport agency visits.** To help call agents develop a better understanding of the passport process and assist customers, NPIC coordinates with local passport agencies to arrange for call agents to observe the process of issuing passports, according to State officials.<sup>31</sup> For example, passport agency officials in Detroit, Michigan, told us that NPIC call agents had toured their offices and asked questions that demonstrated they were well trained and knowledgeable about the information. All General Information and Applicant call agents are assessed and take a certification test, according to NPIC officials.<sup>32</sup>

**Customer service training.** After the FY 2023 call surge, NPIC updated its training programming to meet changing capacity needs. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, call agents attended in-person training for 7 weeks, according to NPIC officials. During the FY 2023 call surge, NPIC changed

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<sup>30</sup>Customer Service skills training includes topics such as identifying hostile language, preventing escalation, and using transition statements to keep the conversation flowing smoothly.

<sup>31</sup>State officials adjudicate passports primarily at passport agencies and centers. Passport agencies are smaller, local branches that handle in-person applicants and smaller volumes of applications, while passport centers deal with larger volumes of applications.

<sup>32</sup>For these assessments, 10 calls are chosen at random and five are scored. Call agents need an average score of 80 percent success on the five calls and no more than one evaluation score of below 80 to obtain certification. If they fail to pass after three attempts, NPIC officials assess whether additional training or more mentoring is necessary.

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its training procedures from in-person attendance over 7 weeks to virtual attendance for 4 weeks. This change allowed NPIC to increase the size of training groups from between 20 and 30 to up to 150 call agents, according to NPIC officials. NPIC made this change to accommodate the influx of General Information call agents hired during the FY 2023 call surge. In September 2024, NPIC shifted back to offering in-person training classes with smaller cohorts of between 10 and 25 new hires. With this shift, NPIC found that first-time certification pass rates increased from 68 percent before the FY 2023 call surge to 90 percent as of September 2024, according to NPIC officials.

As of November 2023, NPIC had adopted a new customer service training approach, a less scripted approach that trains call agents to be more empathetic. A primary function of the training is to improve the interaction between customers and call agents and create a customer-focused service culture. Specifically, this approach involves training NPIC call agents to be active listeners, display empathy, probe effectively regarding customer concerns, proactively offer solutions with options, and clearly explain relevant details and next steps.

**Informational databases.** To answer customer questions, call agents use a database administered by NPIC known as “Right Answers.” This database contains articles that cover topics such as handling customer emergency calls, abusive calls, and mail delivery issues. The database is updated with news and events, agency updates, policy changes, and other resources, according to NPIC officials. For example, during our call listening sessions with Applicant call agents, a customer called NPIC with concerns that they had not received a confirmation email for their upcoming passport appointment. In addition to assisting the customer by resending the confirmation email, the call agent used the information in Right Answers to relay important details about their appointment, such as acceptable payment methods.

Call agents can provide feedback to their supervisors or submit feedback and requests through Right Answers to improve their work experience and customer satisfaction. For example, call agent feedback led to the creation of an overflow pool, a list of customers with 72-hour emergencies who were unable to get an appointment with a passport agency, according to NPIC officials. Call agents now call customers on this list if a passport agency appointment becomes available. Call agents can also rate Right Answers articles on their usefulness, according to State officials. For example, when a call agent sent feedback to NPIC’s Operational Excellence team suggesting revised language for a call

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routing article, the operational team shared the feedback with State officials, who ultimately revised the language in the call routing article.

**External feedback mechanism.** NPIC added a “compliments and complaints” line that collects customer feedback on passport services in general. NPIC reports aggregated information collected through this line to Passport Services on a weekly basis. The vast majority of calls received on this line are compliments, according to NPIC officials. Examples of compliments include comments about knowledgeable call agents who are informative and patient. Examples of complaints include comments about not receiving all returned support documentation. NPIC officials noted that there is also a feedback channel for NPIC to provide input to State on improvements that can be made to its policies and procedures.<sup>33</sup>

## Evaluations

Call agent supervisors and NPIC’s quality assurance team have regularly evaluated NPIC call agents’ customer calls to identify areas for development and coaching needs in a process that began in FY 2006, according to NPIC officials. Specifically, call agent supervisors evaluate call agents by listening to a minimum of three calls and score these calls on criteria such as proper greetings, professionalism, and proper procedures for the specific task to be completed, according to NPIC officials. During coaching sessions, call agents listen to a recording of their call alongside their coach or supervisor and review the evaluation. In addition to these evaluations, NPIC’s quality assurance team reviews a minimum of four call agents’ customer calls monthly.

The scores for these evaluations are averaged for the month to create a monthly quality score metric, according to NPIC officials. A score of 80 or above on an individual call evaluation is considered “passing.” Supervisors review monthly metrics with call agents. All call evaluations can result in coaching; however, persistent low scores can result in corrective actions or removal from specialty skills call lines, such as congressional calls. While continued low scores can potentially lead to termination of employment, terminations resulting from low quality scores are rare, according to NPIC officials.

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<sup>33</sup>For example, NPIC can provide input to State passport agencies or to the customer experience office in State headquarters.

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## Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Department of State for review and comment. The Department of State provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

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We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees and the Secretary of State. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact Tatiana Winger at [wingert@gao.gov](mailto:wingert@gao.gov). Contact points for our Office 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 II.

**//SIGNED//**

Tatiana Winger  
Acting Director, International Affairs and Trade

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# Appendix I: National Passport Information Center’s Telecommunication Performance Metrics

The National Passport Information Center (NPIC) uses performance metrics to ensure that its telecommunication services are meeting customer needs. The service contract between the Department of State and Peckham established NPIC’s performance metrics for telecommunication services. Specifically, for our review period, the awarded fiscal year (FY) 2019 NPIC contract set performance metrics including the percentage of calls answered, the percentage of calls abandoned, and the number of minutes callers waited. For example, the set performance metric for calls answered was 95 percent. Table 1 shows the telecommunication performance metrics in NPIC’s FY 2019 service contract.

**Table 1: National Passport Information Center Telecommunication Performance Metrics, Fiscal Year 2019**

Telecommunication service delivery type	Telecommunication service performance metric
Calls answered <sup>a</sup>	95%
Mean call abandon rate <sup>b</sup>	Not more than 5%
Mean time spent in interactive voice response queue (time waiting to speak to a call agent) <sup>c</sup>	Not more than 5 minutes

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State and Peckham fiscal year 2019 contract. | GAO-25-107409

<sup>a</sup>Calls answered: The percentage of calls answered within a determined time frame.

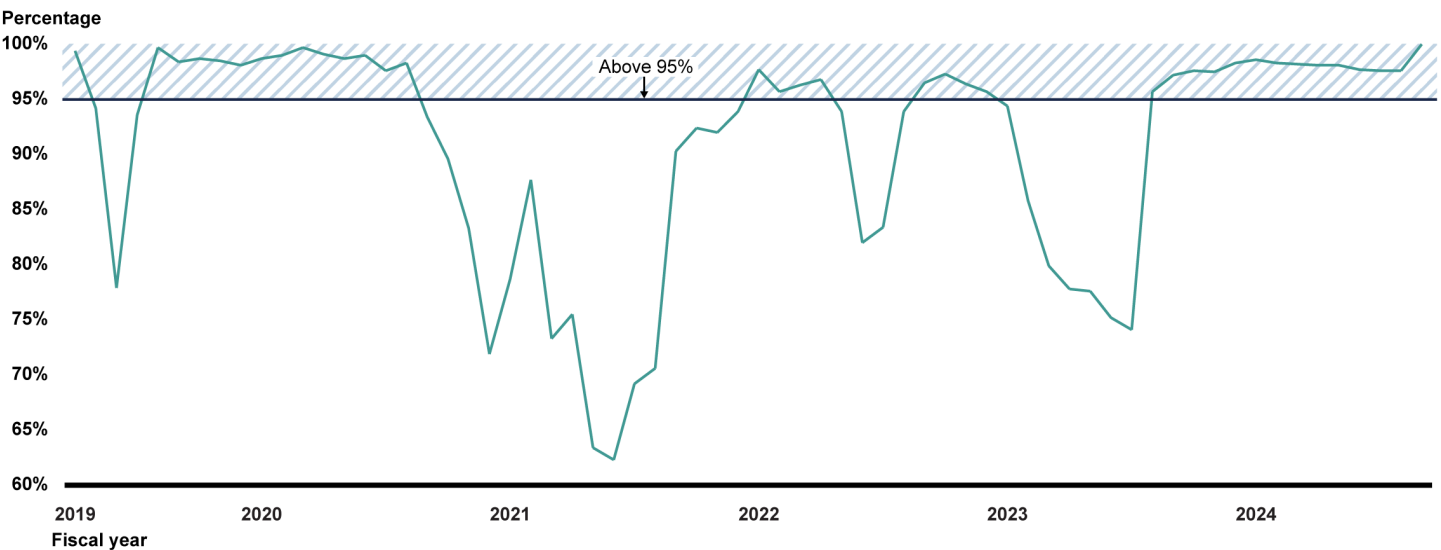
<sup>b</sup>Mean call abandon rate: The percentage of calls where a customer hangs up or “abandons” the call.

<sup>c</sup>Mean time spent in interactive voice response queue: The amount of time a customer spends on hold after selecting the Interactive Voice Response menu option for speaking to a customer service representative.

The percentage of monthly calls answered generally remained above 95 percent from FY 2019 through FY 2024, with the exception of FY 2021 and FY 2023, according to our analysis of NPIC’s telecommunication data (see fig. 8).<sup>1</sup> The monthly abandoned call rate during this period mostly stayed below 5 percent. Dips in the percentage of calls answered and increases in the percentage of abandoned calls during this period were caused by factors related to staffing, infrastructure, and technology that affected NPIC’s performance during this period, according to NPIC officials.

<sup>1</sup>Fiscal year 2019 data are incomplete because data from only April through September of that fiscal year are available.

Figure 8: Percentage of Calls Answered by the National Passport Information Center, April 2019–September 2024



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data. | GAO-25-107409

Note: Month-to-month changes may be affected by discrepancies in call volume data.

The current NPIC contract with Peckham is a 1-year bridge contract for FY 2025 that was designed to ensure quick responses to customers, according to State officials. The contract’s telecommunication performance metrics were revised with updated performance metrics. For example, customer concierge support services, such as congressional contact and urgent travel calls, are more explicitly defined in the bridge contract than in the FY 2019 contract. Table 2 shows the telecommunication performance metrics in the FY 2025 bridge contract.

Table 2: National Passport Information Center Telecommunication Performance Metrics, Fiscal Year 2025

Telecommunication service delivery type	Telecommunication service performance metric
Customer Public Phone Line	
Call Answer Rate	95%
Call Abandoned Rate	5% or less
Call Wait time	10 minutes or less



**Appendix I: National Passport Information  
Center’s Telecommunication Performance  
Metrics**

Telecommunication service delivery type	Telecommunication service performance metric
Congressional Contact	
Call Answer Rate	98%
Call Abandoned Rate	2% or less
Call Wait Time	2 minutes or less
Emails	24 hours
Other Customer Concierge Support Services (Daytime Duty Officer Calls and Urgent travel calls)	
Call Answer Rate	95%
Call Abandoned Rate	5% or less
Call Wait Time	5 minutes or less
Online Passport Renewal Tech Support	
Call Answer Rate	95%
Call Abandoned Rate	5% or less
Call Wait Time	10 minutes or less

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State and Peckham fiscal year 2025 bridge contract. | GAO-25-107409

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# Appendix II: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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## GAO Contact

Tatiana Winger at [wingert@gao.gov](mailto:wingert@gao.gov)

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## Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contacts named above, Jaime Allentuck (Assistant Director), Marisela Perez (Analyst-in-Charge), Gifty Owusu-Tawiah (Analyst), Cindy Do, Debbie Chung, Christopher Keblitis, James Ashley, Scott Borre, Mark Dowling, Sarah Hay, Samantha Lalisan, and Terry Richardson made key contributions to this report.

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