

In January of this year, new rules went into effect requiring United States airline passengers traveling to Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Bermuda to show a passport upon their re-entry into the country. Considering the frequent travel to these destinations and with roughly 73 percent of Americans currently lacking a passport, the State Department's Passport Services is expecting to process 17 million passports this year – a million more than anticipated. This flood of passport applications has overwhelmed the agency, creating a gigantic backlog and frustrating many travelers. Currently it is taking at least 10-12 weeks to process passport applications- nearly twice as long as the typical 6-8 week processing time.

Recently, the government acted to temporarily ease the requirements in order to ensure travelers' plans are not disrupted. The U.S. Departments of State and Homeland Security announced June 7, 2007 that citizens traveling to the aforementioned destinations who have pending applications but have not yet been issued a passport can nevertheless temporarily enter and depart from the United States by air with a government issued photo identification and Department of State official proof of application for a passport. The waiver is in effect through September 30, 2007. (Applications available at [www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov) )

An announcement was also made to push back a plan to require passports to enter the United States by land or sea to at least the summer of 2008, not the originally announced start-up date of Jan. 1, 2008. Neither of these accommodations mean that Americans are exempt from meeting the entry requirements of individual countries, and travelers are advised to review the specific entry and documentation requirements for the countries they are traveling to before departure.

Although my staff has in the past been able to help expedite passports that have been lost in the system or help those in cases of emergency, given the

sheer number of passport applications being processed at this time, I encourage citizens to adhere to the following guidelines:

- **Apply Early.** Currently, it is taking up to 10-12 weeks from the time of application for citizens to receive their passports. Travelers should apply for a passport at least 12 weeks in advance. If the country also requires a visa, travelers should provide for additional time.

- **Expedited Issuance of Passports:** Travelers wishing to apply for expedited processing can get their passports in two to three weeks for an additional fee. **IMPORTANT NOTE:** Applicants requesting expedited service must write **"EXPEDITE"** on the outside of the envelope containing their application.

Information on how to apply for a passport, including how to expedite processing, is available at

<http://travel.state.gov>

- **Same Day Service for Special Cases.** Priority processing is given to travelers with emergency travel needs. Under urgent circumstances, travelers can get a passport, same day, by going to the Special Issuance Agency located at 1111 19th Street, NW, Suite 200 in Washington D.C.

The Issuance Office makes every effort to serve those with departure dates within 48 hours. Travelers choosing this option will need a new application, new photos, a birth certificate, and proof of departure and should plan to be at there as early as possible and be prepared to spend the entire day.

The Washington Passport Agency, at the same location, has a much larger public area that is an alternative for customers in the Washington D.C. region. Appointments are advised and can be made by calling 1-877-487-2778.

- **Review Individual Country Guidelines.** Travelers should review the terms of entry and departure for the countries they will be visiting. The temporarily waived requirements do not exempt travelers altogether from meeting the entry requirements of individual countries.

- **Check with Airline.** Air travelers should check with their airlines to assure that a “proof of application for a passport”

meets their requirements for boarding.

- **Birth Certificates.** If people need to obtain birth certificates in a hurry, they may go to VitalChek online at [www.vitalchek.com](http://www.vitalchek.com) for express service. Most of the health departments also issue birth certificates if born in Maryland.

Currently, the public is limited to calling the National Passport Information Center within 14 days

of travel at 877-487-2778 to inquire about the status of their application. More information is also available on the State Department website at [www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov)

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