



News & Types: Client Advisories

Help! I Still Haven't Received My U.S. Passport and I Need to Travel Next Month

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By: Hirokazu Kishinami, Fazila Vaid

Practices: Immigration

The U.S. Department of State (DOS) is experiencing an unprecedented demand for U.S. passports. During some months this year, the DOS received more than 500,000 applications. The DOS anticipates that 2023 will set the record for the highest demand in U.S. passports, far surpassing prior records. Unfortunately, the demand for U.S. passports is resulting in extensive delays in application processing and passport issuance. The delays and uncertainty are upending travel plans with many being unable to travel on their scheduled dates and losing thousands of dollars in nonrefundable fees.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, due to low demand for U.S. passports, the DOS, like many other agencies, reduced the number of staff handling the processing of passport applications. This year's surge has prompted the agency to aggressively hire workers to address the growing backlog, including opening a satellite office to help process the large number of applications it is receiving.

The DOS has stated that processing times fluctuate throughout the year depending on demand and have changed several times in the past few months. As of March 24, 2023, the DOS is processing routine applications in 10-13 weeks, and expedited applications in 7-9 weeks. Processing times begin when the DOS receives the application at a passport agency or center and does not include mailing times. It may take up to two weeks for the Passport Office to receive the application after the applicant mails it out, and up to two weeks after passport issuance for the applicant to receive the passport.

Below are some tips for faster processing of U.S. passport applications:

- Routine processing can be upgraded to expedited processing for an additional fee of \$60.
- For faster delivery of the application to the U.S. Passport Office, use Priority Mail Express.
- For faster receipt of the newly issued passport, the DOS is currently requesting a separate payment of \$19.53 for 1-2 day delivery.

Please note that applicants receive passports and supporting documents submitted with the application (e.g., birth certificates, prior passports, etc.) in separate mailings. Consequently, wait a few weeks before inquiring about missing documents. Renewals of passport cards are sent only by First Class Mail and are not eligible for 1-2 day delivery service.

What is the fastest method of getting your passport in an emergency? That depends on the nature of the emergency and how soon you need to travel. The DOS makes a distinction between urgent travel and emergency travel, and based on its criteria, both categories of travelers are left biting their nails wondering until the last minute whether they will make their scheduled flight.

Urgent travel is defined as non-emergency travel (e.g., business trip, family wedding, etc.) within the expedited service timeframe which is currently 7-9 weeks. Travelers who have urgent international travel within 14 calendar days or need a foreign visa within 28 calendar days can request urgent travel service. Urgent travel requires the applicant to call the National Passport Information Center to schedule an appointment as a first step. Walk-in visits are not permitted. For months, travelers have been reporting extended wait times just to speak to an agent to secure an appointment. Once that hurdle is crossed, many travelers are surprised to find that the earliest available appointment is in a location far from their residence, sometimes in other states, making urgent travel unrealistic or too costly. Furthermore, the U.S. Passport Office has stated that appointments are limited and it cannot guarantee that one will be available for urgent travelers.

Emergency travel is defined as a life-or-death emergency where the travel need is due to an immediate family member abroad who has died, is dying (hospice care), or has a life-threatening illness or injury. Only a parent, legal guardian, child, spouse, sibling, or grandparent is considered an “immediate family member” for purposes of the emergency service, and evidence of the life-or-death emergency will need to be presented at the time of application (such as a physician’s letter). Travelers who qualify for emergency travel can call the National Passport Information Center to schedule appointments up to two weeks before their trip, but the date of the scheduled appointment must be within three business days of travel. Furthermore, they must carry evidence of their international travel to the appointment.

Reflecting on the delays in the process, we strongly recommend that travelers submit their passport applications several months in advance of their scheduled international trip or delay booking a trip until after the U.S. passport is received. This will avoid flight and hotel cancellations in the event the passport is not timely received. For those individuals who travel frequently, please remember that the U.S. Passport Office will be in possession of certain original documents, including prior passports, for a lengthy period of time, which may impact travel in the interim.

Furthermore, individuals who apply for Trusted Traveler Programs, such as TSA Precheck, Global Entry, NEXUS, SENTRI, and FAST, must also consider processing times. The processing times for applications submitted under the Trusted Traveler Programs are also backlogged due to a surge in applications. For example, the DHS announced that processing times for Global Entry is taking 4 to 6 months compared to 4-6 weeks in prior years. Consequently, early submission of applications under the Trusted Travel Programs is also recommended.