

AMI BERA, M.D.

6TH DISTRICT, CALIFORNIA

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Congress of the United States House of Representatives

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August 18, 2023

Dear Secretary Blinken and Assistant Secretary Rena Bitter,

I am writing to express my deep concern about delays in passport processing for the constituents in California. Due to the backlog of passport processing and extended wait times for passports, I request that the Department provide the California Delegation with a briefing addressing processing times and backlog statistics specific to all California passport agencies.

Since March 2023, there has been a significant increase in requests from our constituents seeking assistance with obtaining passports in time for planned international travel. Despite being the most populous state, California has only three passport agencies to assist its more than 40 million residents. Currently, all Northern California residents, totaling over 15 million people, are directed to the San Francisco passport processing agency. However, the high cost of living (79% higher than the national average) and ongoing housing challenges make it difficult to retain staff at the San Francisco Passport Agency. Additionally, all Southern California and Nevada residents, totaling over 25 million people, are directed to the Los Angeles and San Diego passport processing agencies. Consequently, processing delays, extended shipping times, and increased passport for expedited services due to long processing times have caused frustration and dismay for our constituents.

As you are aware, Section 9105 of Public Law 117-263 – the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023- requested a report from Consular Affairs to address the need for geographic diversity and accessibility of passport agencies. While this report examines continental areas that are more than five hours' driving distance from the nearest passport agency, it failed to address the need for passport agencies in regions with a higher influx of passport applications and greater accessibility for our constituents. The report also states that the process of opening a new agency takes up to five years, which could significantly slow customer service across the system. Our constituents deserve access to a more efficient and effective passport system than the one suggested in this report.

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Given the increase in passport processing delays, I require expedited answers to the following questions by September 20, 2023:

- Please provide the information below disaggregated by each individual passport agency and center in California for the past calendar year:
 - What is the average processing time for an **initial** passport request, from the time the passport application is received to when the individual receives their passport?
 - What is the average processing time for an **expedited initial** passport request, from the time the passport application is received to when the individual receives their passport?
 - What is the average processing time for a **renewal** passport request, from the time the passport application is received to when the individual receives their passport?
 - What is the average processing time for an **expedited renewal** passport request, from the time the passport application is received to when the individual receives their passport?
- Is the Department currently evaluating opening additional passport agencies and centers? If so, where?
- What factors are considered by the Department when determining a location to open a passport agency or center?
- Why do passport agencies and centers take five years to develop? How can the State Department or Congress expedite this process?
- What authorities are needed by Congress to open additional passport agencies and centers?
- What solutions to passport processing delays are currently being explored by Consular Affairs?
- What steps are being taken to modernize the consular IT enterprise?

Thank you for your immediate attention to this critical issue impacting our constituents. I look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ami Bera".

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