

July 15, 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Secretary Blinken,

I write today to call your attention to the significant backlog and delay in processing times for U.S. tourist passports, an issue that directly impacts West Virginians. Constituents are reaching out to my office at an unprecedented rate because of the delay in processing tourist passports. In years past, my office has received an average of five passport cases *per month*. Currently, my office receives at least five passport cases *per day*. As an example, last week my staff processed 30 expedited passports through the Department of State system, 28 of which were successful. The remaining two were not processed in time so those West Virginia families had to cancel their planned vacations. Just this week, I had a constituent who received his passport, with my assistance, and his first name was spelled incorrectly. He has tried for days to get through on the Department of State provided phone-line, but has been unable to. If my staff is not successful in contacting the passport staff, he will be unable to travel this weekend.

Additionally, constituents face longer than usual wait times to inquire over the phone about passport status, requests to process passport applications as expedited are taking up to 20 days to be advanced to the expedite queue, and in-person appointments are limited to life or death emergencies. All of these delays have resulted in financial loss to our constituents as non-refundable travel plans have had to be cancelled or rescheduled with additional out-of-pocket fees.

While action has been taken over the last month to increase staffing for congressional inquiries at Department of State service centers, wait times to speak with a representative typically stretch for hours. My staff follows the specific instructions for time-sensitive inquires but due to the backlog we are forced to have difficult conversations with constituents that the Department of State will not complete their passports in time for travel. Nearly all of my staff's constituent work is now dedicated to processing passports through the Department of State, which forces us to put other important constituent issues on the back-burner.

We also understand the significant impact that the pandemic has had on Department of State staffing at service center locations. It is my understanding that constituents are now able, on an extremely limited basis, to request in-person appointments. This will hopefully start to address the backlog and processing times. I am requesting if these centers have not reopened, along with the Special Issuance Agency, that you consider fully reopening them as soon as possible in accordance with COVID safety protocols.

Throughout the years, my staff has enjoyed working with passport issuance staff on constituent issues and greatly values the good relationship that they have developed. I hope that by calling your attention to this backlog and delay, you will help get the passport staff the resources they need to clear the backlog and reduce the wait times. I also invite you to co-host a Passport Fair in West Virginia with me to help alleviate the backlog.

Thank you for your time and attention to this important matter. Serving the constituents of the great state of West Virginia is my greatest honor and I look forward to working with you to help find a solution that serves my constituents. If you would like to discuss my concerns, please contact my staff Mara Boggs or Terri Berkley at 304-342-5855.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Joe Manchin III". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

U.S. Senator Joe Manchin III