



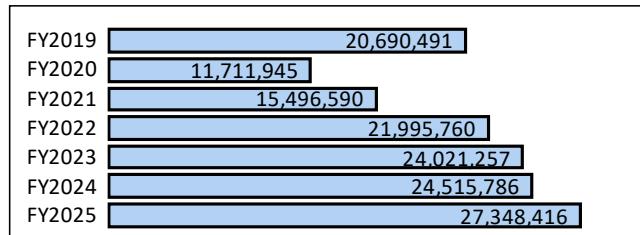
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U.S. Passport Services: Background and Issues for Congress

Background

The U.S. Department of State (DOS) defines a passport as “an internationally recognized travel document that verifies the identity and nationality of the bearer.” Congress has authorized DOS to grant, issue, and verify U.S. passports. DOS has indicated the share of Americans holding a passport has increased from 5% in 1990 to 48% in 2024. Further, the number of passports DOS issues on an annual basis has increased. DOS’s Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) issued over 5.5 million passports in FY1996, and this figure more than doubled by FY2006, reaching over 12 million. In FY2025, CA issued 27.3 million passports, which marks a new annual record (see **Figure 1**). As demand for passports increases, Congress may seek to conduct continued oversight to ensure that DOS effectively implements plans announced by the Biden Administration and continued by the Trump Administration to modernize and expand passport services across the United States.

Figure 1. U.S. Passports Issued, FY2019-FY2025



Source: State Department, Bureau of Consular Affairs “Reports and Statistics,” <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/about-us/reports-and-statistics.html>.

Passport Application, Adjudication, and Processing Steps

Current DOS regulations require first-time applicants for a U.S. passport, along with most applicants under age 18 seeking to renew their passport, to submit their application in person at a passport acceptance facility. There are over 7,400 passport acceptance facilities across the United States. They include post offices, clerks of court, public libraries, and other local government offices. DOS advises those intending to travel in less than three weeks to make an appointment at a passport agency or center (described in the following paragraph) rather than a passport acceptance facility. Applicants seeking to renew their passport are generally eligible to do so online or through the mail.

DOS-administered application intake facilities are responsible for opening and sorting passport application packages (sent through the mail or online), processing passport application fees, entering relevant application data into DOS databases, and transmitting application packages to passport agencies and centers for adjudication. CA currently administers 28 passport agencies and centers

across the United States and has announced plans to open six additional agencies (for more detail, see the “Passport Services Since 2023: From Processing Delays to Service Improvements” section). Once a passport application is approved, the application information is electronically transmitted to a print center where the passport is printed. CA maintains two such facilities, located in Hot Springs, AR, and Tucson, AZ. After printing, the passport is mailed to the applicant. In addition to adjudicating applications transmitted from intake facilities, many passport agencies and centers offer in-person passport services by appointment to those who require a passport for urgent international travel needs.

While the aforementioned procedures generally apply to U.S. citizens in the United States, U.S. embassies and other overseas posts also offer passport services to U.S. citizens abroad. Specific procedures vary by post. In some cases, U.S. citizens must apply for all passport services in person at the relevant embassy or consulate, while other posts allow qualified applicants to renew their passport by mail. Similar to passport agencies and centers in the United States, overseas posts offer appointments to U.S. citizens who require a passport for immediate international travel.

Passport Services Since 2023: From Processing Delays to Service Improvements

In 2023, U.S. citizens applying for a passport faced delays, with processing times for routine applications having increased from six to nine weeks in January 2023 to 10-13 weeks by March. During a congressional hearing in June 2023, then-Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs Rena Bitter ascribed longer processing times to several factors. These factors included attrition within CA’s passport adjudication workforce that followed the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to meet continued in-person work requirements, along with addressing pent-up demand for passports after COVID-19-related international travel restrictions were relaxed. In December 2023, DOS announced that it had successfully met its goal of returning processing times to prepandemic levels, which were (as of December 2019) six to eight weeks for routine applications and two to three weeks for expedited applications.

As the 2023 processing delays receded, DOS sought to advance several policies intended to improve passport services. In some cases, congressional action contributed to DOS’s work in this area. For example, Section 6104 of the Department of State Authorization Act of 2023 (Division F of P.L. 118-31) required the Secretary of State to submit a strategy to Congress describing how DOS could “provide [U.S.] residents living in a significant population center

more than a 5-hour drive from a passport agency with urgent, in-person passport services, including the possibility of building new passport agencies.” Congress also strengthened oversight of passport processing. Section 6102 of the DOS Authorization Act of 2023 required DOS to submit quarterly reports to Congress regarding processing times.

Then-Secretary of State Antony Blinken submitted a strategy to comply with Section 6104 to Congress on June 18, 2024. The strategy revealed DOS’s intention to open six new passport agencies located in Salt Lake City, UT; Kansas City, MO; Orlando, FL; Charlotte, NC; San Antonio, TX; and Cincinnati, OH. Additionally, in September 2024, then-Secretary Blinken announced that DOS was making its online passport renewal system (OPR) fully available to the public. Although OPR eases elements of the renewal process (by eliminating the need for eligible applicants to obtain physical passport photos, fill out a paper application, and mail these and other required materials), it does not reduce passport processing times. OPR eligibility criteria are currently limited to applicants who are aged 25 or older, are renewing a passport that is (or was) valid for 10 years and is either expiring within one year or expired less than five years ago, and are not requesting expedited processing, among other requirements. When announcing the launch of OPR, then-Secretary Blinken noted that passports were being processed “well under the advertised [six to eight] weeks processing times.” On October 3, 2024, DOS announced that processing times had been reduced from the prior commitment of six to eight weeks to four to six weeks for routine applications. It added that expedited passport processing remained at two to three weeks. As of this writing, DOS lists routine processing times of four to six weeks and expedited processing times of two to three weeks.

In July 2025, the Trump Administration submitted its most recent Section 6102 report regarding processing times to Congress. The report explained that DOS met committed processing times by increasing passport application adjudicative staffing by over 32% since January 2022 and authorizing the use of staff overtime during periods of increased demand. The report indicated that DOS intended to hire additional passport staff in 2025. As of this writing, CRS has not seen information suggesting how many, if any, additional personnel DOS hired in the latter part of 2025.

At his nomination hearing in January 2025, Secretary of State Marco Rubio expressed his intention to build upon former Secretary Blinken’s work to modernize the passport issuance process and open six new passport agencies. In other areas, the Trump Administration has taken a different approach from the Biden Administration. On January 20, 2025, President Trump issued Executive Order (E.O.) 14168, titled “Defending Women From Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government.” This E.O. tasked Secretary Rubio with ensuring that each passport reflected “an individual’s immutable biological classification as either male or female.” This reversed prior policy that allowed passport applicants to self-select their gender and provided for a third “X” gender marker, which the Biden Administration

described as for those of an “unspecified or another gender identity.” For additional detail on these matters, see the “Issues for Congress” section.

Issues for Congress

As Congress conducts oversight and potentially considers other options to direct or shape DOS’s ongoing efforts to enhance passport services, Members may consider the following issues:

Passport Agency Expansion. DOS’s six planned new passport agencies are currently at various stages of project development. DOS tentatively projects that the Cincinnati and Kansas City agencies will open in fall 2026, while the remaining four agencies are scheduled to open no later than 2028. In a 2023 report to Congress, DOS noted that building, equipping, and staffing new passport agencies could be time-intensive, citing issues such as the approvals process for construction and the effort required to vet and train new staff. Congress may seek to determine whether additional authorities and/or resources are required to enable DOS to stand up these new agencies within its stated timeframes.

Sex and Gender Markers on Passports. E.O. 14168 reversed previous State Department policy allowing passport applicants to self-select their gender. In *Orr v. Trump*, transgender and nonbinary citizens challenged the policy in court, alleging that it violated the Constitution and the Administrative Procedure Act. The federal district court hearing the case issued a preliminary injunction barring the Administration from implementing the policy until the case was resolved. In November 2025, the Supreme Court stayed the injunction, allowing the Administration to proceed with the policy. The case is ongoing, and a decision on the merits has not been reached. Congress may choose to weigh in on this issue legislatively.

Passport Services Modernization. Congress continues to inform DOS passport modernization efforts. Section 7508 of the Department of State Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025 (Division G of P.L. 118-159) requires DOS to pursue modernization priorities, including the creation of a mobile app to allow passport applicants to communicate more closely with DOS during the adjudication process; the expansion of eligibility criteria for OPR to include most passport applicants, including adults applying for a passport for the first time; and the use of additional tools to adjudicate passport renewals, while maintaining human passport authorizing officers. Section 7508 required DOS to submit an action plan to Congress outlining how it intends to implement these modernization priorities and describing its current progress in doing so by December 2025. As of this writing, CRS has not seen indication that DOS submitted this plan. As Congress conducts oversight of DOS’s efforts, it may seek to engage with the DOS to determine the nature of any additional funding, authorities, or other means of support DOS may require to implement this section of law consistent with congressional intent.

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