

BACKGROUND: Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, needed reforms to safeguard America's travel systems were instituted across U.S. government departments. The U.S. visa application and review process carried out by the Department of State, for instance, underwent significant security changes including a near 100 percent interview requirement for non-immigrant visa (NIV) applicants. This concerted effort to safeguard the U.S. visa issuance process, however, was not matched with staffing, resources, technology or new programs to ensure the continued timely and efficient processing of visa applications. As a result, visa wait times at the State Department's 211 visa-issuing posts around the world have often exceeded the 30-day processing standard set by State. A U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report issued in July 2007 noted that almost half of the State Department's visa-issuing posts at that time reported maximum wait times for visa interviews of 30 or more days and that interview waits were 30 plus days every month at 20 posts. As a result, foreign travel professionals and travelers report a growing negative perception about the U.S. visa issuance process. For instance, a June 2006 survey by the Travel Industry Association and completed by 155 international travel professionals throughout the world showed that travelers are choosing to travel to other destinations instead of the U.S. in part because of viewed visa requirements, "hassle," price and the perception that the U.S. is unwelcoming.

ISSUES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

1. **Minimize Visa Interview Wait Times through More Efficient Staffing:** Visa processing delays result in a disincentive for those who want to visit the U.S. for business, medical needs and leisure. In 2005, the National Foreign Trade Council estimated that U.S. businesses lost \$30 billion between 2002 and 2004 because of America's broken visa system.

Action Items:

- Direct resources either through the redistribution of existing applicant fees or direct appropriations to hire new consular officials at the most backlogged consulates to meet State's 30-day visa processing standard.
- State should continue to use "rapid response teams" who can be deployed to troubled spots for a limited time to clear backlogs and advise consulates on process improvements.
- Develop improved staffing allocation models to staff across shifts, working hours and peak demand periods.
- Measure wait time improvements by requiring the State Department to report to the President and Congress on its progress and issue a detailed staffing long-term plan to keep pace with visa demands.

2. **Improve Overseas Visa Facilities:** Funding for expanding and improving visa facilities or constructing new facilities overseas has been limited. The negative perception associated with the visa issuance process is heightened in countries where waits for visa interviews are long and facilities are cramped and uncomfortable for prospective visitors and consular staff.

Action Items:

- Direct greater funding to expand, improve and open new non-immigrant visa facilities in priority consulates such as China, Brazil and India.

- The Department of State should also consider adapting other existing U.S. government facilities for the purpose of visa issuance.

3. **Utilize Innovative Technology:** In many countries, would-be travelers do not live within a short distance of a U.S. consulate. For example, in Brazil and India – with a total land mass equal to or in excess of the United States – there are only four consulates in the entire country. Many travelers in these countries must incur the cost and time of a trip to the consulate just to apply for a U.S. visa. Beginning in 2006, the State Department piloted videoconferencing technology to test the viability of conducting remote visa interviews, and in fiscal year 2008, Congress directed the State Department to develop a demonstration program that would expand access to consular services through the use of mobile consular services and provided \$5 million for this purpose.

Action Item:

- Investigate the cause of the delay at the State Department for deploying the use of videoconferencing technology at U.S. consulates and work to address the problems that are hampering the deployment.

4. **Continue Improvements to Business Visa Processing:** Recognizing the importance to the U.S. economy of facilitating the visa process for business travelers, State has made progress in this area, and the U.S. has seen visa wait times for international business travelers decrease. For instance, in 2006, State established a Business Visa Center and partnered with American Chambers of Commerce around the world to help facilitate visa application procedures for U.S. businesses.

Action Items:

- In order to get the most out of the partnerships with the U.S. Chambers of Commerce, State should develop a set of best practices to distribute across its consulates.
- The State Department should also reestablish a program that allows those working in the U.S. to renew NIVs without leaving the U.S. in order to reduce the burden on consular resources and improve service to legitimate visa applicants.