United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 18, 2007

The Honorable Condoleezza Rice
Secretary of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Rice:

We write to express our continuing concerns with delays in processing passport applications that are seriously complicating – and in some cases forcing the cancellation of – travel abroad.

In recent weeks, significant and increasing numbers of our constituents have contacted us for help in receiving passports due to long processing delays that threaten imminent travel plans. These travelers applied for passports well in advance of their planned travel. However, due to the large volume of passport requests associated with the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI), they were not receiving passports sufficiently in advance of their planned departure dates to complete planning for their travels. In an unfortunate and rising number of these cases, our constituents have not received their passports in time, forcing them to cancel long-held travel plans and/or incur significant expenses to change their plans.

It is our understanding that there are now more than 2 million passport applications pending. In fact, passport office staff were so overwhelmed that they were unable to respond to routine status requests, and asked that inquiries be e-mailed with the planned departure date in the subject line, since they were only able to work on the most urgent requests – those closest to the planned departure date. This virtually ensured that many travelers will receive their passports only at the last minute, making it impossible to make informed decisions on whether to continue with a planned itinerary (and risk having to cancel if the passport does not arrive) or to postpone a planned departure (and incur steep fees for changing the itinerary).

To add insult to injury, in many cases we were asked to provide constituents' credit card numbers when making inquiries on their behalf, because the Department intends to charge them for expediting passport processing and for delivering their passports via Federal Express. Neither charge would be necessary if the Department were processing the original applications in a timely manner. It seems grossly unfair to charge American taxpayers extra for remedying problems that were caused by the government itself.

We are not in any way casting blame on the front line employees of your agency who process passport applications. It has been our experience that they have been working long and hard to ensure that travelers receive their passports prior to planned departures. However, it is clear that they are simply overwhelmed by the sheer volume of applications resulting from the implementation of the air travel provisions of the WHTI.

It is unacceptable that American citizens were missing trips because the State Department did not fully anticipate the increase in passport applications and take appropriate action to increase processing resources. Your recent announcement that the Department would suspend until September 30 the passport requirement for air travel from Canada, Mexico, Bermuda, and the Carribean was an important, if belated, recognition of the serious problems processing delays were causing travelers.

However, people traveling to other parts of the globe are still in jeopardy of having to cancel their trips because of the backlog on processing passports. We continue to be concerned that citizens traveling to places that still require a passport will incur significant expenses to cancel trips or rearrange their plans because of delays in passport processing. In addition, we fear that the current backlog will recur after the temporary relief expires on September 30, and that there will be tremendous complications when the new WHTI land and sea requirements are implemented.

Consequently, we ask that you take the following actions:

1. Immediately cease to charge unwarranted fees for expediting and delivering passports whose issuance is delayed by the Department's failure to plan for the increased volume of passport applications;
2. Immediately take further action to return processing time for passports to normal, pre-WHTI timeframes for those traveling to countries for which passports are still required; and,
3. Develop and share with the Congress a plan (including any additional statutory authority or resources you may require) to ensure that similar problems do not recur either when the WHTI air travel requirements again take effect after September 30 or when the land border and sea travel provisions of the WHTI requirements take effect.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this important issue.

Sincerely,

Kent Conrad

Saxby Chambliss

Bill Frist

Trent Lott

Patrick Leahy

Carl Levin

Patty Murray

Elizabeth Dole

Ben Cardin

Barbara A. Mikulski

Jay Rockefeller

Jack Reed

Chuck Schumer

Debbie Stabenow

Herb Kohl

Daniel K. Akaka

Max Baucus

Hillary Rodham Clinton

Blanche L. Lincoln

Barbara Boxer

Norm Coleman

Robert Menendez

Bill Nelson

John Cornyn

Olympia Snowe

John E. Sununu

Ron Wyden

Amy Klobuchar

Joe Lieberman

Jim Bunning

David Vitter

Bob Corker, Jr.

Kit Bond

Jim Talent

E. Benjamin Nelson

Jim Inhofe

Pat Roberts

Tim Johnson

George V. Voinovich

Dick Durbin

Byron L. Dorgan

Dianne Feinstein

Ted Stevens

Mitch McConnell

Susan M. Collins

Harry Reid

Chris Dodd

Tom Harkin

Mark Pryor

Mary L. Landrieu