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One Hundred Eighteenth Congress  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on Foreign Affairs  
2170 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

August 31, 2023

The Honorable Rena Bitter  
Assistant Secretary  
Bureau of Consular Affairs  
600 19<sup>th</sup> St NW  
Washington, DC 20431

Dear Assistant Secretary Bitter:

As you are aware, Americans' growing pace of international travel has led to a crippling backlog in the passport issuance process by the Department. Our constituents have been waiting anywhere from seven to thirteen weeks to secure the document which allows them to visit loved ones, conduct business, or tour recreationally overseas. Unfortunately, the Department's failure to process applications in a timely manner has led some desperate applicants to turn to private brokers, who – based on information provided by constituents – are allegedly stockpiling and selling appointments for urgent and emergency travel, often at exorbitant prices. In the best-case scenario, brokers are charging individuals for a service that can be facilitated by the National Passport Information Center. In the worst-case scenario, brokers are reportedly promising appointment bookings that are, in actuality, fake. Thus, robbing individuals of hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars. Either way, bad actors are allegedly preying on Americans in need of government travel documents, a situation we find unacceptable.

Preventing bad actors from gaming the system is the ultimate solution, and the Department, working in coordination with law enforcement entities, must investigate whether and to what extent these actors are violating state or federal law in their creation of a quasi-black market for passports. We recognize it can take time for law enforcement to identify all instances of wrongdoing and gather all necessary information, but we call on the Department to expedite its efforts to ensure there are no fraudulent or other illegal activities occurring within the passport application process, and that wrongdoers are punished to the fullest extent of the law.

Since we began oversight of this issue, your staff have taken these concerns seriously and have appropriately routed the information to the relevant Department officials. We are grateful for their work and attention to this matter. We understand that the Department has established a rule to prohibit changes to appointments once they have been made. This rule was established to prevent the manipulation of appointment slots. However, we are still observing instances where

appointments allegedly held and sold by brokers are possibly being changed, undermining the integrity of the appointment system. In light of these developments, we ask the following questions:

1. Was Consular Affairs aware of these brokers and their potential illegal activity before our offices brought them to your attention?
2. Has the Department launched or supported investigations into these brokers and potential illegal activity?
3. When exactly was this new rule put in place?
4. What was Consular Affairs' process for communicating this new policy? Were all employees notified?
5. Has Consular Affairs reviewed passport appointment data to determine if employees were adhering to the new rule?
6. What additional steps is Consular Affairs taking to root out malfeasance and ensure Americans can access urgent travel and emergency appointments?
7. Are there any changes in law that are needed to help address this problem?

We respectfully request that you continue to focus your efforts to expeditiously root out and prevent malfeasance in the passport application process. It is paramount that the integrity of this process is maintained, and we trust that your department will take the necessary steps to ensure this. We appreciate your full and prompt attention to this critical matter, and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Michael T. McCaul  
Chairman



Michael V. Lawler  
Member of Congress