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TERRORISM  
ASIA, THE PACIFIC, AND NONPROLIFERATION

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
**Washington, DC 20515-4611**

June 4, 2020

The Honorable Carl C. Risch  
Assistant Secretary  
Bureau of Consular Affairs  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington, D.C., 20520

Dear Assistant Secretary Risch:

I write to express deep concern that the Department of State has essentially halted all routine passport processing and that plans to address the growing backlog of passport applications are insufficient.

On March 19, the State Department paused the passport application process and stopped taking new applications due to the coronavirus pandemic. According to the State Department website, "If you apply or renew now, you will experience **significant delays of several months** to receive your U.S. passport and the return of your citizenship evidence documents (such as birth certificates or naturalization certifications)." This delay has already created a backlog of 1.6 million applications, and that number is only growing by the day. Effective March 20, passport agencies and centers are only offering service to customers who have a life-or-death emergency. These applicants must show proof of "serious illnesses, injuries, or deaths in your immediate family" to be considered.

While I understand that the coronavirus pandemic has introduced significant challenges to the State Department's normal operating procedures, and I appreciate that the Department is undertaking efforts to keep its employees safe, the Department must also develop plans to resume the routine processing of passport applications to prevent the already sizeable backlog from becoming unmanageable. Our passport specialists need to be able to do their job, and do it safely with sufficient personal protective equipment, social distancing, and access to ongoing testing.

At present, only approximately 100 employees (out of 4,000 employed by passport agencies) are currently processing applications. Passport agencies should be able to increase capacity to process demand and reduce the backlog, while maintaining safe operations, so that urgent needs for travel are prioritized and met. Reportedly, the Department has released plans for a phased reopening of passport facilities, based on local conditions. During phase one, "limited staff" will return to work to process application on a first-in, first-out basis. During phase two, most passport specialists will return to work, and the passport offices will begin limited appointments at passport offices to include a slightly expanded type of processing. During phase three, passport agencies will resume normal operations, but this is not expected until at least early fall after the backlog is processed.

I am deeply concerned that these plans are insufficient to address the growing backlog of passport applications. I ask that you consider taking some small - but potentially significant - interim steps, such as

opening the DC passport office five days each week instead of the current schedule of only two days per week, and opening - where possible - select processing centers with a reduced staff level to ensure proper distancing and other safety measures such as masks, gloves, and sanitizers. The resumption of routine passport processing is a critical part of the U.S. economic recovery. We are all public servants and must balance safety and service, just like our postal workers, first responders, trash collectors, and others. I urge you to examine the phased reopening plan and please respond to me with the goals and timelines that will ensure that the Department is employing all available resources to reduce the backlog in passport applications and resume routine processing as soon as possible, while maintaining a safe environment for employees amidst the coronavirus pandemic.

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Gerald E. Connolly". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent flourish at the end.

Gerald E. Connolly  
Member of Congress