



NATIONAL FEDERATION OF FEDERAL EMPLOYEES

Affiliated with the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers



NFFE News Release

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AGENCY AT FAULT FOR PASSPORT SECURITY FAILURES, NOT EMPLOYEES

Washington, D.C. – In the aftermath of a troubling GAO report issued last month, wherein GAO investigators found authentic U.S. Passports could be obtained fairly easily using fraudulent documents, the State Department has publicly faulted Passport workers for the errors, and have even suspended the adjudication duties of the passport specialists that approved the four fraudulent applications.

“These employees are not at fault,” said Colin Walle, President of the National Federation of Federal Employees, Local 1998, a nationwide local of Passport Services employees. “They just happened to be the unlucky ones who received the GAO’s test applications. Using these workers as scapegoats for agency failure is unwarranted.”

In the study, GAO investigators attempted to acquire U.S. passports using fraudulent documents and information. GAO conducted four tests and was successful in obtaining a genuine U.S. passport in each case. The report found that there are significant vulnerabilities in the State Department’s passport issuance process, concluding: “GAO’s investigation shows that terrorists or criminals could steal an American citizen’s identity, use basic counterfeiting skills to create fraudulent documentation for that identity, and obtain a genuine U.S. passport from the State Department.”

According to an April 13th letter from GAO to Congress, State Department officials claimed that “human error” led to the issuance of the four passports because passport specialists did not wait for the results of a required Social Security Administration database check before approving the four GAO applications.

“I need to set the record straight because the State Department’s comments are inaccurate,” said Walle. “Passport employees were instructed to move forward with the processing of passport applications and not to wait for certain checks that would slow the adjudication process. The agency made that decision, and they are responsible. They should not be blaming the employees.”

In fact, the union has been warning the Passport Agency about passport vulnerabilities due to rushed applications for years.

“The underlying problem is that passport specialists do not have enough time to give each passport application the attention it deserves. The agency only gives Passport workers two minutes and thirty seconds per application, on average, and that quota cannot realistically be met without quality suffering,” said Walle. “There is too much focus on quantity at the expense of quality. We have been warning the agency for years that this was a problem, and very little has been done about it. The results of the GAO’s test are not surprising to us.”

The State Department has since taken some temporary measures to alleviate the production quotas, but more needs to be done, and done quickly.

“We applaud some of the temporary steps taken by the agency, but more needs to be done to place tangible emphasis on fraud prevention and to give passport specialists the time and tools they need to do the job right,” said Walle. “Our members take passport security very seriously. We believe that the employees understand the passport issuance system and its weaknesses, and are in the best position to develop solutions to eliminate the vulnerabilities. Passport employees need to be included in the process of finding solutions to combat passport vulnerabilities.”

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Established in 1917, the National Federation of Federal Employees is the oldest union representing civil service federal employees. NFFE currently represents 100,000 federal employees government-wide, including virtually all rank-and-file workers at Passport Agency. NFFE is affiliated with the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers. For more information, go to www.nffe.org.