

U.S. Consuls Help Americans Abroad

There are U.S. embassies in more than 160 capital cities of the world. Each embassy has a consular section. Consular officers in consular sections of embassies do two things:

- they issue visas to foreigners;
- they help U.S. citizens abroad.

There are also consular officers at about 60 U.S. consulates general and 20 U.S. consulates around the world. (Consulates general and consulates are regional offices of embassies.)

U.S. consuls usually are assisted by local employees who are citizens of the host country. Because of the growing number of Americans traveling abroad, and the relatively small number of consuls, the expertise of local employees is invaluable.

In this pamphlet, we highlight ways in which consular officers can assist you while you are traveling or residing abroad.

To help us help you while you are abroad, register with the nearest U.S. embassy or consular. This makes it easier for consular officers to reach you in an emergency or to replace a lost passport.

Consular officers provide a range of services -- some emergency, some nonemergency.

EMERGENCY SERVICES

Replace a Passport - If you lose your passport, a consul can issue you a replacement, often within 24 hours. If you believe your passport has been stolen, first report the theft to the local police and get a police declaration.

Help Find Medical Assistance - If you get sick, you can contact a consular officer for a list of local doctors, dentists, and medical specialists, along with other medical information. If you are injured or become seriously ill, a consul will help you find medical assistance and, at your request, inform your family or friends. (Consider getting private medical insurance before you travel, to cover the high cost of getting you back to the U.S. for hospital care in the event of a medical emergency.)

Help Get Funds - Should you lose all your money and other financial resources, consular officers can help you contact your family, bank, or employer to arrange for them to send you funds. In some cases, these funds can be wired to you through the Department of State.

Help In An Emergency - Your family may need to reach you because of an emergency at home or because they are worried about your welfare. They should call the State Department's Overseas Citizens Services at (202) 647-5225. The State Department will relay the message to the consular officers in the country in which you are traveling. Consular officers will attempt to locate you, pass on urgent messages, and, consistent with the Privacy Act, report back to your family.

Visit In Jail - If you are arrested, you should ask the authorities to notify a U.S. consul. Consuls cannot get you out of jail (when you are in a foreign country you are subject to its laws). However, they can work to protect your legitimate interests and ensure you are not discriminated against. They can provide a list of local attorneys, visit you, inform you generally about local laws, and contact your family and friends. Consular officers can transfer money, food, and clothing to the prison authorities from your family or friends. They can try to get relief if you are held under inhumane or unhealthful conditions.

Make Arrangements After The Death Of An American - When an American dies abroad, a consular officer notifies the Americans family and informs them about options and costs for disposition of remains. Costs for preparing and returning a body to the U.S. may be high and must be paid by the family. Often, local laws and procedures make returning a body to the U.S. for burial a lengthy process. A consul prepares a Report of Death based on the local death certificate; this is forwarded to the next of kin for use in estate and insurance matters.

Help In A Disaster/Evacuation - If you are caught up in a natural disaster or civil disturbance, you should let your relatives know as soon as possible that you are safe, or contact a U.S. consul who will pass that message to your family through the

State Department. Be resourceful. U.S. officials will do everything they can to contact you and advise you. However, they must give priority to helping Americans who have been hurt or are in immediate danger. In a disaster, consuls face the same constraints you do - lack of electricity or fuel, interrupted phone lines, closed airports.

NONEMERGENCY SERVICES

Issue A Consular Report Of Birth - A child born abroad to U.S. citizens parents usually acquires U.S. citizenship at birth. The parents should contact the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate to have a "Report of Birth Abroad of a U.S. Citizen" prepared. This is proof of citizenship for all purposes.

Issue A Passport - Consuls issue approximately 200,000 passports abroad each year. Many of these are issued to persons whose current passports have expired.

Distribute Federal Benefits Payments - Over a half-million people living overseas receive monthly federal benefit payments. In many countries, the checks are mailed to the U.S. embassy or consulate and distributed through the local postal service.

Assist In Child Custody Disputes - In an international custody dispute, a consul can try to locate the child abroad, monitor the child's welfare, and provide general information to the American parent about laws and procedures which may be used to effect the child's return to the United States. Consuls may not take custody of a child, or help a parent regain custody of a child illegally or by force or deception.

Help In Other Ways - Consuls handle personal estates of deceased U.S. citizens, assist with absentee voting and Selective Service registration, notarize documents, advise on property claims, and provide U.S. tax forms. They also perform such functions as adjudicating U.S. citizenship claims and assisting U.S. courts in legal matters.

WHAT CONSULAR OFFICERS CANNOT DO

In addition to the qualifications noted above, consular officers cannot act as travel agents, banks, lawyers, investigators, or law enforcement officers. Please do not expect them to find you employment, get you residence or driving permits, act as interpreters, search for missing luggage, or settle disputes with hotel managers. They can, however, tell you how to get help on these and other matters.

If you need to pick up mail or messages while traveling, some banks and international credit card companies handle mail for customers at their overseas branches. General Delivery (Poste Restante) services at post offices in most countries will hold mail for you.

PRIVACY ACT

The provisions of the Privacy Act are designed to protect the privacy rights of Americans. Occasionally they complicate a consul's efforts to assist Americans. As a general rule, consular officers may not reveal information regarding an individual American's location, welfare, intentions, or problems to anyone, including the family members and Congressional representatives, without the expressed consent of that individual. Although sympathetic to the distress this can cause concerned families, consular officers must comply with the provisions of the Privacy Act.

For more information, contact: Overseas Citizens Services, Department of State, Room 4811, Washington, D.C. 20520.