

## **IX. The Consular Function**

### **Introduction**

When American citizens come in contact with the Department of State, it is most likely with a consular employee. Consular sections at U.S. embassies and consulates provide a variety of essential services that ensure the protection of the interests of the United States and its citizens on the most fundamental level. The Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) exists to assist Americans abroad, facilitate legitimate travel, and deter the travel of persons likely to remain illegally in the United States or to engage in activities harmful to our country. Consular employees issue millions of passports each year to American citizens, who make about 60 million trips abroad annually and whose relatives, friends, and employees obtained millions of U.S. visas. Consular officers visit citizens in the hospital or prison or call to report the death of a loved one overseas.

### **Passports and Visas**

Passport demand more than doubled during the Clinton administration—from 3.2 million in 1992 to 7.4 million in 2000. Visa demand also was strong, rising from 7 million in 1993 to 9.5 million in 2000, despite the addition of eight countries to the Visa Waiver Program, which enabled citizens of participating countries to travel to the United States for tourism or business for 90 days or less without obtaining a U.S. visa in advance. Immigration and Naturalization Service statistics indicated that up to 18 million foreign nationals entered the United States each year under the Visa Waiver Program, accounting for approximately 55 per cent of all business and pleasure travelers. The program also allowed consular officials to concentrate on countries where fraud and other risks were higher. As workloads in passport agencies and consular sections of embassies and consulates grew in the mid-1990s, staffing remained static at best. When President Clinton took office, consular fees totaled about \$400 million annually, and all fees were deposited in the Treasury.

### **Enhancing U.S. Border Security and Services**

During the Clinton administration, significant changes in consular operations enhanced both U.S. border security and services to consular customers. The first change took place on April 30, 1994, when President Clinton signed the Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1994 and 1995 (Public Law 103-236). Section 140 of that Act authorized the Secretary of State to charge and retain a fee for processing machine-readable visas. It was enacted in an effort to address weaknesses in U.S. border security identified in the aftermath of the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York on February 26, 1993. The use of these fees allowed the Department of State to address a decade-long investment deficit affecting consular services and made possible the most far-reaching changes in U.S. consular operations in the past 50 years.

The Authorization Act required two fundamental changes in consular operations in exchange for granting fee-retention authority: implementation of an automated name-check system at all posts by the end of FY 1995 and of the machine-readable visa (MRV) program at all visa-issuing posts by the end of FY 1996. The deficiencies in consular operations identified during the investigation of the World Trade Center bombing were no secret. By 1993, the Department had made a strategic decision to replace outdated

and vulnerable name-check systems and implement a more secure, machine-readable visa (MRV), but inadequate resources prevented the Bureau of Consular Affairs from implementing the necessary changes at more than a snail's pace. Using the funds from the retained fees, the Department met both requirements of Section 140. Subsequent budget bills authorized the continued use of MRV fees for consular operations. From 1994 to 2000, MRV fee collections totaled more than \$1.3 billion. By 2001, CA was over 90 percent fee-funded, and consular fees constitute an integral part of State's overall financial plan. Under the authorizing legislation, MRV revenue had to be used exclusively to support consular programs, but many bureaus other than CA had a role in supporting consular work and also benefited directly from MRV revenues. These revenues had a significant impact on the Department's infrastructure, human resources base, and information technology capabilities.

This source of funding enabled the Department to improve significantly those elements of the U.S. border security system that were within its authority. The Department's strategy had five interrelated objectives:

- Enhancing data sharing initiatives with other agencies and increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of name-check systems by providing consular officials responsible for adjudicating passport or visa applications with information regarding that applicant;
- Strengthening consular and passport services by providing business-quality equipment, developing modernized software, and implementing an effective equipment replacement program;
- Providing worldwide and redundant connectivity in support of passport and visa issuance, including sufficient bandwidth to support data sharing and remote system management;
- Meeting non-immigrant visa workload needs, addressing seasonal workload peaks for consular and passport services, and making systematic and major investments in consular, passport, and support personnel by providing training on the systems and processes that support consular operations;
- Ensuring the integrity of the passport and visa issuance processes and products through improvements to the documents themselves, enhancements in information storage and retrieval, expanded training of anti-fraud personnel, and a comprehensive program to investigate allegations of fraud.

During the Clinton administration, the Department's Border Security Program had significant accomplishments, at no cost to U.S. taxpayers. Highlights included:

- **Providing every visa-issuing post with an automated name-check capability.** This requirement was met on September 28, 1995. The system automatically performed a worldwide name check on every applicant before a visa can be issued, providing consular officers with a history of any applicant's prior refusals or any warnings about the applicant entered anywhere in the world.
- **Installing at every visa-issuing post the Machine-Readable Visa adjudication and production system.** This was accomplished as of August 23, 1996. The Department then began replacing the first-generation MRV system with a Year

2000-compliant system that was more secure and efficient. This process was completed for all 223 visa-issuing posts in September 1999.

- **Establishing on-line connectivity between every visa-issuing post and the Department's Consular Lookout and Support System (CLASS), used for checking the names of applicants.** The final post was brought on-line in the spring of 1997. By the end of 2000, CLASS contained approximately 8 million names, with nearly 2.5 million lookout records added in FY 2000. The majority of data came from U.S. embassies and consulates.
- **Strengthening the CLASS system by introducing new algorithms that performed more accurate name checks.** In 1993, there was only one general-purpose name-check algorithm. By the end of 2000, there were four such algorithms. The first new algorithm, which matched dates of birth, was implemented during FY 1996. An Arabic algorithm was introduced worldwide in FY 1997, followed by a Russo-Slavic algorithm in FY 2000. An algorithm for Hispanic names was scheduled to be brought on-line in 2001. Enhancements also allowed checks against databases of passports reported lost or stolen.
- **Redesigning and rewriting other consular automated systems, including those that supported the provision of overseas consular services to American citizens and immigrant visa processing, to operate in the Year 2000 and in the local area network to which the Department was migrating.** In September 1999, the Bureau completed installation of Y2K-compliant hardware and software at more than 200 overseas posts as well as domestic sites supporting more than 1,000 employees. Users received comprehensive Information Technology equipment and support, including training and remote systems management, at more than 7,000 domestic and overseas workstations. CA had a business-standard, 3-year equipment replacement cycle for all systems installed overseas and provided on-scene training at every post once every 12-18 months.
- **Creating the ability to share consular data and applications electronically between Washington and field offices in the United States and abroad and with other agencies with a need for that data.** State passes lookouts entered into CLASS electronically to the Treasury Enforcement Communications System (TECS), the clearinghouse data-collection system used by many law enforcement agencies. Lookout records from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) are also passed electronically from TECS to CLASS. Posts overseas contributed to the Interagency Border Inspection System (IBIS) used by INS inspectors, via CLASS, lookouts relating to persons for whom there were serious grounds for exclusion. With data from the Department of Health and Human Services, the names of 3.1 million U.S. citizens who were more than \$5,000 in arrears on child support payments were entered in the passport section of CLASS pursuant to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 and Section 452(k) of the Social Security Act (42 U.S.C. 652(k)), which required the State Department to deny passports to such persons. The Bureau developed a corporate database, which served as a repository of key consular data. Data entered in consular databases at passport agencies and posts abroad was replicated in Washington, and data on immigrant visa applications was passed

electronically between the Department of State and the Immigration and Naturalization Service. All visa issuance data, including photographs, was centralized in the Department and available for transmission to INS. Using this data, INS inspectors were better able to clear legitimate travelers and detect counterfeit visas.

- **Funding the Border Crossing Card (BCC) program in Mexico.** This program produced a machine-readable travel document that contained a biometric (fingerprints) of the authorized bearer. The biometric-enhanced card was required by section 104 of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996 (Public Law 104-208). It would eventually replace the BCCs currently held by over 5 million Mexicans. From April 1, 1998, to the end of the Clinton administration, the Bureau adjudicated 3.28 million applications, and INS issued 2.69 million of the new cards.
- **Introducing a photodigitized U.S. passport.** The new passport, introduced on November 16, 1998, featured a computer-generated image of the bearer and biographic data embedded in the passport. This innovation represented the most important improvement in passport technology in 17 years and vastly enhanced the security of the passport, making it less vulnerable to tampering. In the 2 years after introduction of the new passport, there were no credible reports of successful fraud against the document, compared to some 2,500 such reports annually against its predecessor. The new technology also allowed State to transmit passport applications electronically.
- **Financing essential central computer support and communications systems that supported the Border Security Program.** CA funded improvements to the mainframe computer system upon which consular name checks operated and a significant portion of the telecommunications needed to make worldwide unclassified e-mail possible for everyone in the Department.
- **Helping to finance deterrent and investigative efforts to counter passport and visa fraud.** Beginning in mid-1995, CA redefined its fraud prevention programs worldwide toward a proactive, management approach concentrating on strategic and operational intelligence analysis and reporting, information sharing, training, automation, and countering alien smuggling and the alteration and counterfeiting of travel documents. CA represented the Department at meetings with International Civil Aviation Organization experts on international standards for machine-readable travel documents and met frequently with passport authorities from other countries, notably Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, to share common problems and lessons learned. CA also worked with state officials and other agencies to enhance the security of vital records and raise awareness of the dangers of posting them on the Internet. In 2000, the Bureau enhanced the integrity of the nonimmigrant visa by changing the format and coding of certain data. MRV funds have been used to support fraud investigations, including the expenses of witnesses testifying in passport and visa fraud cases, and for investigations and prosecutions of cases involving alien smuggling and trafficking in women and children.

- **Meeting the administrative and support costs associated with producing more secure U.S. travel documents.** MRV fees helped to finance consular-related activities in the geographic bureaus as well as in the Bureaus of Diplomatic Security, Administration, Information Resources Management, Financial Management and Policy, Human Resources, and Intelligence and Research, and at the Foreign Service Institute. The Bureau also funded bank collection of MRV fees to relieve consular and fiscal officers from fee-collection activities, and as of January 2001 over 80 percent of the MRV revenue was collected off-site.
- **Meeting short-term staffing needs by assigning temporary-duty personnel to posts abroad.** In addition to financing the staff costs of nearly 2,000 American employees of the Department who provided overseas and domestic consular services, investigate passport and visa fraud, manage and operate computer systems, or otherwise provide services essential to consular operations, CA funded an active TDY program to handle staffing gaps and other unanticipated or peak season staffing shortfalls at posts overseas. Rehired Foreign Service retirees working on a while-actually-employed basis and officers normally based in Washington provided the temporary assistance.
- **Establishing the Charleston Passport Center to help meet passport demand through 2005 and the Kentucky Consular Center to manage the Diversity Visa lottery.** The Charleston Passport Center in South Carolina, opened in May 2000, was a government-managed/contractor-operated facility, located in a renovated former-Navy building. It was scheduled to become State's largest passport issuance facility, producing up to 2 million passports per year, returning 300 jobs to the Charleston Navy area. The Kentucky Consular Center, also contractor-operated, opened in October 2000 to handle the Diversity Visa (DV) lotteries for FY 2002 and beyond and immediately began processing entries received during the DV 2002 application period, which began on October 5 and ended on November 1, 2000. The site in Kentucky was identified, purchased, renovated, and opened within a 10-month period while creating some 50 jobs in a region of Kentucky with historically high unemployment rates. The transfer of the DV function to the Kentucky Center freed up space and staff needed to re-engineer the immigrant visa process at the National Visa Center in New Hampshire.

### **Reinventing Consular Functions**

The Department of State responded to the challenge of President Clinton and Vice President Gore to reinvent government to make it work better, cost less, and get meaningful results by putting customers first, cutting red tape, empowering employees, and cutting back to basics. The Bureau of Consular Affairs became a reinvention lab in April 1993. CA examined how it provided information and services to the public and how it could improve its performance in a time of decreasing resources. Through cost-saving measures, CA aimed to close the gap between the increased demand for consular services and fewer dollars to provide those services. Service to the public was the primary consideration, with the goal of improving how U.S. citizens were treated by the Department and regarded its work. These activities meshed with CA's participation in

the Department of State's Strategic Management Initiative (SMI) and implementation of new laws that affected consular services.

CA reorganized to enhance customer convenience and streamlined processes to increase efficiency. An early focus was the reinvention of Overseas Citizens Services (OCS) as a "one-stop shop" for Americans with problems abroad. All OCS employees took customer service training. In connection with the government-wide regulatory reform initiative, OCS did a comprehensive review of the regulations and internal rules governing services to Americans abroad and expanded the categories of officers permitted to do notarial services, thereby giving greater flexibility to posts using non-traditional staffing. The Office instituted faster, cheaper, and less bureaucratic means to convey information to the next-of-kin of Americans who had died abroad and eliminated or combined many reporting requirements.

OCS and posts abroad took steps to improve assistance to Americans affected by crises abroad, including aviation disasters. The Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996 required the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and individual air carriers to take actions to address the needs of families of passengers involved in aircraft accidents. Beginning in November 1996, Assistant Secretary Mary A. Ryan signed *Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) Reflecting Best Practices and Procedures* between the Department of State and air carriers to provide a basis for mutual assistance in reacting to aviation disasters abroad. In June 1997, Secretary Albright signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the National Transportation Safety Board concerning assistance to families following domestic transportation disasters which, for the first time, defined a role for State in air accidents occurring inside U.S. borders. The Foreign Air Carrier Family Support Act, signed by President Clinton in December 1997, required foreign carriers flying into and out of the United States to meet the same requirements imposed upon the domestic carriers by the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996.

Since the signing of MOUs with the NTSB and air carriers, OCS had real life tests of the agreements on cooperation in aviation disasters. The August 1997 Korean Air Lines crash in the U.S. Territory of Guam was the first test of the MOU concerning the "foreign" aspects of domestic aviation disasters. A liaison officer from the Bureau of Consular Affairs coordinated the State Department's efforts with the NTSB, Department of Defense, Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and foreign embassies in Washington. A representative from the State Department's Crisis Management Staff joined the NTSB team sent to Guam. The U.S. Embassy in Seoul worked with the Korean government to facilitate travel of Korean officials and family members and provided support for American families resident in Korea who had a loved one in the crash. The crash of Swiss Air 111 in 1998 in Canada called into action the MOU with Swiss Air's code-share partner, Delta Airlines. There was a Delta representative in the State Department's Operations Center in accordance with the MOU. After the crash of Egypt Air 990, CA convinced the NTSB not to treat the disaster as a crash "overseas" to be investigated by foreign authorities. The Bureau also worked closely with state authorities to find a way to issue findings of presumptive death for most victims.

During the Clinton years, consular officers assisted Americans caught up in crises abroad ranging from civil unrest and coups to earthquakes and hurricanes to attacks on buses and tourist destinations. They coordinated the evacuation of over 2,000 Americans from Indonesia in 1998. The Bureau of Consular Affairs trained several hundred consular personnel in responding to crises; upgraded its crisis management equipment; updated the crisis case-tracking system; created a stand-alone evacuation database for use by embassies abroad; and positioned worldwide-capable cellular phones throughout the world for use in a crisis. Representatives of the NTSB and the airlines participated in this crisis management training, and consular employees took training given by the airlines. This cross-training was designed to enhance intergovernmental and private sector cooperation to the benefit of the American victims of air disasters and their families.

OCS was the first recipient of the Public Employees Roundtable's International Public Service Excellence Award in 1997, presented by the Vice President presented the award. The announcement concerning the award stated:

With luck, you may never need the Overseas Citizens Services, but if you travel or reside abroad and trouble erupts, you'll be thankful for their outstanding ability to keep you informed and provide for your safety. Around the clock, OCS is alert to helping fellow citizens resolve myriad problems, including as many as 3000 arrests, 6,000 deaths, 11,000 international adoptions and 1,200 child abduction cases annually.... OCS's teamwork and pro-active orientation led to the creation of Emergency Fly-Away Teams with experienced officers and state-of-the-art equipment to augment embassies in times of crisis.

State took seriously its responsibility to inform U.S. citizens traveling or residing abroad of potential risks to their safety. The Consular Information Program served since the early 1990s as the Department of State's primary means of alerting the public to possible problems abroad. The cornerstone of the program was the Consular Information Sheet (CIS), prepared for every country in the world, which provided basic information on conditions affecting travel. In the mid-1990s, CA established a prototype CIS so that format and core categories would be consistent. Subsequently, CA added several new categories, and the CIS continued to evolve. Core categories included a brief country description, entry requirements, medical facilities, medical insurance, crime information, criminal penalties, road safety and traffic conditions, children's issues, and the location of the U.S. embassy and any consulates. They may also have included country-specific information, such as unusual currency/customs regulations, safety and security, prohibitions on photography, or problems facing dual nationals. CISs generally did not give subjective advice, but presented information in a factual manner so that a traveler could make an informed decision concerning travel to a particular country. CISs were updated annually (or more frequently if warranted) to ensure that the information is accurate.

The Bureau of Consular Affairs issued Travel Warnings to recommend that Americans avoid travel to certain countries when circumstances or conditions there present danger to the American traveler. Such situations included, but were not restricted to, civil strife or major natural disasters. Public Announcements, a feature added to the Consular Information Program during the Clinton years, were made any time there was a perceived threat or other relatively short-term condition posing significant risk to the

security of American travelers. These publications were designed to ensure that all travelers had access to information that U.S. embassies and consulates provided to their staff and to Americans residing in foreign countries. Since the 1980s, Foreign Service posts had used "telephone trees," networks of American volunteers known as wardens, to spread alerts through the American community, but during the Clinton years they expedited delivery of time-sensitive information and reduced the burden on the wardens by communicating directly with local Americans by fax and e-mail.

CA routinely used an electronic bulletin board, as well as automated telephone and fax-back systems, and announcements to the media to convey travel information to the public. In 1994, Database Magazine ranked CA's Consular Affairs Bulletin Board among the "Ten Best Federal Government BBSs" and Government Executive magazine gave CA's automated information systems its Federal Technology Leadership Award for outstanding achievement in making government more effective through the use of information systems. St. Olaf College posted travel information on its Internet web site.

### **CA Presence on the World Wide Web**

In early February 1996, the Vice President's National Performance Review, later known as the National Partnership for Reinventing Government (NPR), announced that it wanted federal agencies to make information and services available via the Internet by the end of that month. CA inaugurated its own web site on February 21, 1996, at <http://travel.state.gov>, providing more consular information available on the Internet. NPR considered the web site one of the best in government and gave it a Hammer Award in 1996. This award was Vice President Gore's special recognition to teams of federal workers who made significant contributions to the NPR principles of putting customers first, cutting red tape, empowering employees, and getting back to basics.

From 1996 to the end of the Clinton administration, the amount and variety of information on the site grew enormously, along with its popularity. In 2000, there were 96 million hits. The strategy of providing up-to-date, useful information that loaded fast for all users earned the web site a place on Government Executive magazine's 1999 list of the 16 "Best Feds on the Web," as well as other honors. In 1998, *USA Today* called CA's web site "the best free site" for safety information for international business travelers.

At the beginning of 2001, the web site also included downloadable passport applications and nonimmigrant visa forms in eight languages plus a searchable database of places to apply for a passport. The site contained the forms most commonly used by the public for consular services well before the December 2000 deadline specified in President Clinton's December 17, 1999, memorandum to the heads of executive departments and agencies on electronic government. The Bureau continually enhanced the web site by adding features requested by its customers. In 1999, a page on crisis awareness and a special section for students and student advisers were added, and in 2000 a new section on road safety abroad, a visa reciprocity table, and an interactive non-immigrant visa form appeared. The section on passports used easy-to-read informational charts that were also screen-reader compliant for use by the blind, and the whole web site was certified in 2000 as accessible to the disabled in accordance with the 1998 amendments to Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Both CA and U.S. embassies and consulates found that using the Internet made consular information and

services available in forms convenient to the public with minimal expenditure of resources. A customer-service improvement allowed citizens to register with some embassies on-line, creating a record of an American's presence in a foreign country that consular officers could use to contact the person or their next-of-kin in the event of an emergency.

### **Protecting American Children**

The welfare of American children abducted from the United States by one of their parents is a very high priority. In 1994, CA created the Office of Children's Issues (CI) as the focal point of federal efforts on international parental child abduction and international adoption issues. The Vice President awarded the State Department's first Hammer Award to OCS's Office of Children's Issues in 1994 for "exemplifying the highest ideals of professionalism and commitment to public service." That office continued to innovate and, on September 5, 1995, signed a "Cooperative Agreement" with the Department of Justice and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). Under this partnership agreement, the center processed the cases of children abducted to the United States from the countries that were parties to the Hague Convention on parental child abduction, which enables CI to devote more time to cases of American children who have been abducted to other countries. They received a Hammer Award in 1997 for their work with the Justice Department's Office of Victims of Crime to help indigent families effect the return of children taken abroad by a non-custodial parent.

In response to an ever-increasing challenge, the size of the Office of Children's Issues in 1999-2000 increased, strengthening the Bureau's efforts on behalf of wrongfully removed children taken abroad when international marriages have failed. The Department participated in an inter-agency policy coordination group that created a detailed action plan to improve the federal response to the problem of international parental child abduction. CA developed a comprehensive interagency case tracking management system to produce more comprehensive statistics that enabled the Bureau to keep parents better informed. In November 1999, CA established CI points of contact at every embassy and consulate and regularly shared with them the latest on policy and procedures and encouraged them to share "best practices" through a special section of the Department's Intranet site. CA transferred the Children's Passport Issuance Alert Program from Passport Services to CI in May 2000 to ensure that parents fearing international abduction of their children have to deal with only one State Department office.

CA was the Central Authority for the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction, which provided a mechanism to return parentally-abducted children to their place of habitual residence. The Bureau raised international parental child abduction issues around the world, urging non-signatory countries to join the Convention and those that were already signatories to honor their commitments. The failure of several countries to uphold the requirements of the Convention attracted Congressional attention, and the Department's reports to Congress in 1999 and 2000 identified numerous signatories as non-compliant with the Convention, including Austria, Germany, Honduras, Mauritius, Mexico, Panama, and Sweden. The Department continued to seek resolution of contentious issues with non-compliant countries in an

attempt to assist disadvantaged American children and parents. In 2000, non-compliance by Germany escalated to the highest levels of both governments. In May, President Clinton met with German Chancellor Schroeder and discussed concerns about U.S. children abducted to Germany. This meeting resulted in the appointment of the Special Envoy of the President and Secretary of State for Children's Issues and formation of a bi-national working group to address issues of German non-compliance.

During the Clinton years, the Department placed a new emphasis on outreach and prevention activities, sending officers throughout the country to meet with groups of parents, lawyers, judges, and law enforcement organizations. On September 17-21, 2000, CA hosted The Common Law Judicial Conference on International Child Custody, attended by delegates from six common law countries and observers from 22 other countries. Delegates focused on international child abduction and The Hague Abduction Convention, exchanged information on their judicial systems, and approved best practices to improve operation of the Convention.

### **Improving Passport and Visa Services**

The National Partnership for Reinventing Government's primary focus was on Passport Services (PPT), which served CA's largest U.S. citizen customer group. As one of the President's Vanguard Agencies, PPT set and met goals to improve customer service dramatically by 1996. The legendary lines at the New York Passport Agency disappeared in 1996 with the adoption of an appointment system, which was expanded to the other agencies over the next 4 years. The National Passport Center, an innovative public-private partnership that handled most passport renewals, received a Hammer Award in 1996. Passport Services also garnered Hammer Awards for the Boston "Call the Boss" comments hotline (1998), the Los Angeles Agency's partnership with the Immigration and Naturalization Service for reinventing the passport application process for newly naturalized citizens (1998), and the partnership with the U.S. Postal Service to increase the number of places where Americans could apply for passports close to home (2000). The Miami International Airport Reinvention Lab (in which the Miami Passport Agency was a partner) was a finalist for the 1997 Innovations in American Government Award (local government category).

"Reinvention mini-labs" were established at several Foreign Service posts to test the feasibility of experimental programs. Some posts showed exceptional initiative. Seoul won the Vice President's Hammer Award in 1996 for major technological innovations to improve the visa process. Mumbai's visa section was honored in 1998 for advancing U.S. business and diplomatic efforts by dramatically reinventing the way visas were issued. Bogota and Hong Kong received Hammer Awards in 1999 for, respectively, using bar-coding to improve non-immigrant visa processing and establishing new standards for customer service including visa issuance within 1 hour of interview for qualified immigrants and within 1 hour of document submission for qualified non-immigrants. In 2000, the American Citizens Services unit of the Embassy in Kuwait received a Hammer Award for pioneering an encrypted on-line U.S. citizen registration system. The Vice President presented the 1998 Public Service Excellence Award to the adoption unit in Moscow. The innovations piloted at these posts and others, particularly Tokyo, London, Sao Paulo, Caracas, and the Canadian and Mexican posts, formed the

basis for the series of "best practices" cables begun in 1999 and the Best Practices Handbook issued in 2000.

### **Use of "Best Practices" To Improve Services**

As the Bureau most routinely in touch with the needs of American citizens and their overseas contacts, CA sought to improve its service through a robust program of "Best Practices" for which CA has been widely and publicly praised. CA set three goals for its best practices: improved customer satisfaction, improved decision-making, and increased efficiency, and encouraged consular personnel to develop and share management best practices through conferences, e-mail, cables, and the Intranet.

When the Bureau conducted its Cost of Service Study in 1995, it found that some consular managers and posts handled business processes better than others. As a result, CA began to look intensively for business process improvements to gather them together in a "best practices handbook." The initial "best practices" focused heavily on the visas as operations in that area were repetitive and could be re-engineered. Later, however, CA found that other areas such as American Citizen Services, formerly considered "boutique" operations, also offered opportunities where "best practices" could make a positive difference. The Bureau shared 49 Best Practices cables with the field on various issues from 1997 to 2000.

CA created a "best practices" coordinator position in 1998. The Bureau gave that individual a budget to bring individuals together; to reach outside the Department to organizations like Disney, the Post Office, Raytheon, and others who also engaged in best practices; and to develop training courses in partnership with the Foreign Service Institute (FSI). CA started a series of "Best Practices" workshops that included a certain number of experienced section chiefs along with more junior officers and several best practices "stars" who had shown a commitment to and success with developing and implementing best practices.

After several years of experience sharing best practices, they became a well-recognized management tool integral to effective consular operations. As a result, CA no longer sponsored best practices conferences but partnered with FSI to put on a series of consular leadership development conferences. These new programs focused on career development and consular continuing education rather than on the nuts and bolts of consular processing improvements.