

September 2009

STATE  
DEPARTMENT

Wide Range of  
Emergency Services  
Provided to American  
Citizens Overseas, but  
Improved Monitoring  
Is Needed

This report was revised on October 1, 2009, to include the list of congressional requesters on page 32.



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# Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-09-989](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

In 2008, the Department of State (State) estimated nearly 5 million U.S. citizens lived overseas, and 64 million trips were taken overseas by U.S. citizens. Since protecting and serving U.S. citizens abroad are among State's chief priorities, State must be prepared to provide emergency assistance to Americans abroad. This report describes (1) what services State provides to U.S. citizens who are the victims of crimes, suffer accidents, or otherwise need emergency services; (2) how State is prepared to assist U.S. citizens who are in need of emergency services; and (3) how State monitors the assistance it provides to U.S. citizens in need of emergency services.

## What GAO Recommends

To ensure State has accurate, reliable data to monitor and evaluate its provision of emergency services worldwide, we recommend the Secretary of State direct State's Bureau of Consular Affairs to (1) provide guidance on information to be entered into the ACS system to ensure data are consistently captured and reflect workload; and (2) improve the reporting function in the ACS system. To ensure American citizens can easily find emergency contact information, we recommend the Secretary of State (1) require posts' main Web site pages to include emergency contact information; and (2) periodically test the accuracy of this information. State agreed with our conclusions and recommendations.

View [GAO-09-989](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Jess Ford at (202) 512-4268 or [fordj@gao.gov](mailto:fordj@gao.gov).

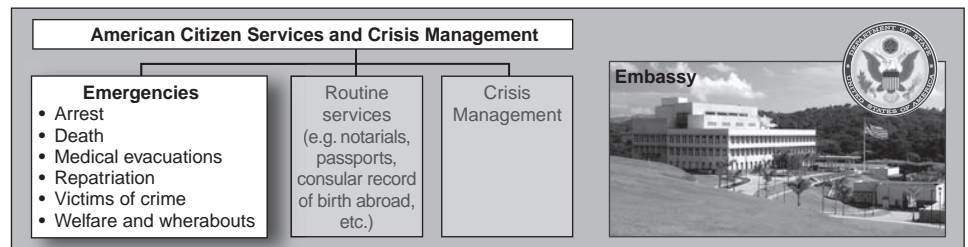
## STATE DEPARTMENT

### Wide Range of Emergency Services Provided to American Citizens Overseas, but Improved Monitoring Is Needed

#### What GAO Found

State provides a number of emergency services to American citizens abroad through its network of 267 embassies and consulates in 174 countries. State's emergency services cover circumstances including deaths, arrests, medical or financial concerns, crime, and missing persons' cases. State provides emergency assistance to Americans at all hours, and provides information such as travel warnings to travelers and U.S. citizens living overseas through a variety of mechanisms, including the department's embassy and consulate Web sites. However, our review of a random sample of posts' Web sites found that only 14 percent had emergency phone numbers on the Web sites' main page. State also maintains a warden system to disseminate information from the embassy to U.S. citizens living in the country, and can send messages directly to Americans who provide contact information to the department.

#### Emergency Services Provided by American Citizen Services



Sources: GAO and State Department; Corel (clip art).

State has trained staff dedicated to providing emergency assistance overseas as well as in Washington, D.C. Depending on the size of the post, American Citizen Services (ACS) may be provided by multiple staff, or a single consular officer serving as the sole provider of all consular services including emergency services. Locally engaged staff are a key component of posts' provision of emergency services, as is State's ability to deploy staff where needed when emergencies arise. State provides guidance, largely through the Foreign Affairs Manual, formal on-the-job training, and other resources to ensure staff are able to carry out these services.

The Bureau of Consular Affairs has a variety of mechanisms to monitor its provision of emergency services; however, all of these mechanisms have limitations and, as a result, Consular Affairs cannot be assured it is allocating its resources effectively. The ACS system, which is intended to track emergency services provided by posts, and the consular package, which provides post-specific workload information to guide consular resource allocations, both contain unreliable data. For example, reporting weaknesses and unclear guidance associated with the ACS system prevent posts from accurately monitoring and evaluating their workload or using the data to make management decisions. Although State shifts its consular resources to meet emergency demands, absent current and reliable data on the worldwide demand for emergency services, Consular Affairs may not make decisions based on a clear understanding of the global workload.

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## Abbreviations

ACS	American Citizen Services
Consular Affairs	Bureau of Consular Affairs
FAM	Foreign Affairs Manual
FSI	Foreign Service Institute
FSO	Foreign Service officer
LES	locally employed staff
State	Department of State

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United States Government Accountability Office  
Washington, DC 20548

September 24, 2009

### Congressional Requesters

Serving and protecting the nearly 5 million Americans who reside overseas as well as the U.S. citizens who take more than 64 million trips to foreign countries each year are chief priorities of the Department of State (State).<sup>1</sup> State's 260-plus embassies and consulates around the world have staff dedicated to assisting Americans facing emergencies overseas, such as providing death notification to the next of kin, or visiting Americans who have been arrested to ensure they are being treated humanely and understand the charges against them and the country's judicial process. In a high-profile case that took place during the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, the father-in-law of a U.S. coach was killed by a Chinese national. In response, the U.S. embassy in Beijing aided the victim's family by coordinating assistance with Chinese officials and the police, as well as the hospital and funeral home; assisting with repatriating the deceased's remains; and directing the family to the various services available to victims of crime overseas.

Current State data indicate the number of U.S. citizens traveling, working, and studying abroad continues to grow, leading to a growing number of Americans who may need U.S. government-provided emergency services during their travel. For example, State reported that about 3,500 American citizens were arrested abroad in 2004, while close to 6,000 were arrested in 2008.

This report addresses: (1) what services State provides to U.S. citizens who are the victims of crimes, suffer accidents, or otherwise need emergency services; (2) how State is prepared to assist U.S. citizens in need of emergency services; and (3) how State monitors the assistance it provides to U.S. citizens in need of emergency services.

To describe the services State provides to U.S. citizens who receive emergency services overseas, we interviewed State officials from the Bureau of Consular Affairs (Consular Affairs) and the Office of Overseas Citizens Services and reviewed State guidance, specifically the Foreign

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<sup>1</sup>The United States began overseas representation in 1777, 12 years before the creation of the Department of State.

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Affairs Manual (FAM) chapter dealing with Consular Protection of U.S. nationals abroad. We also traveled to China, Germany, Mexico, Thailand, and South Africa to observe how assistance is provided through U.S. embassies and consulates. We reviewed a random sample of embassy and consulate Web sites to identify the presence of emergency contact information on those sites. To describe how State is prepared to assist U.S. citizens in need of emergency services, we interviewed Consular Affairs officials regarding the process for determining resource allocations to posts that provide services to U.S. citizens. We also reviewed the training, guidance, and support provided for consular staff, and interviewed Foreign Service officers (FSO) and locally employed staff (LES) about the training and resources available for American Citizen Services (ACS) related activities. In addition, we reviewed guidance and support available to assist staff, such as the FAM, post-specific operating procedures, and the duty program; and observed FSOs and LES overseas in five countries providing routine and emergency services such as visiting prisoners in jail. To assess how State monitors emergency assistance to U.S. citizens and how management uses this information, we interviewed officials from Consular Affairs and FSOs overseas about two consular reporting systems. In addition, we reviewed the 2010 Consular Bureau's Strategic Plan, as well as the Mission Strategic Plans for four of the five countries we visited. We also interviewed all seven Regional Consular Officers who are responsible for providing guidance to more than 90 small posts around the world, and reviewed 43 of their trip reports, which included findings and recommendations regarding the provision of ACS in the countries they cover.

We conducted this performance audit from October 2008 to September 2009, in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. Appendix I contains a more detailed description of our scope and methodology.

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## Background

The protection of American citizens overseas, including the provision of emergency services, is one of State's primary functions.<sup>2</sup> Providing these services is the responsibility of Consular Affairs and is carried out by embassies and consulates.<sup>3</sup> Emergency services available to American citizens overseas include dealing with arrests, death cases, financial or medical emergencies, welfare and whereabouts inquiries, and victims of crimes.

State also assists victims of terrorism, kidnapping, child abduction, and child abuse.<sup>4</sup> In addition to providing assistance to American citizens in need of emergency services, State also provides routine services, including issuing citizenship documentation; overseeing federal benefit payments to American citizens living in foreign countries; providing information on absentee voting; and notarizing documents. These activities are referred to as American Citizen Services, or ACS, both in Washington, D.C., and at embassies and consulates. Before U.S. citizens can receive assistance, they must first provide proof of U.S. citizenship.<sup>5</sup> In cases where there is uncertainty about citizenship, State regulations indicate that consular officers should err on the side of providing services until U.S. citizenship can be determined.

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<sup>2</sup>American citizens are defined as any person who was born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof. U.S. Const. amend. XIV, § 1. Under State regulations, nationals of U.S. territories and dependencies are also eligible for consular protection and services; however, lawfully permanent residents are not eligible to receive such services including the spouse and children of U.S. citizens who are lawfully permanent residents. See U.S. Department of State Foreign Affairs Manual Volume 7 section 012 (May 20, 2009). For the definitions of "national of the United States," "nationals but not citizens of the United States at birth," "outlying possession of the United States," and "lawfully admitted for permanent residence" see 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(22); 8 U.S.C. § 1408; 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(29); 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(20).

<sup>3</sup>In addition to protecting U.S. citizens overseas, State is also responsible for conducting American diplomacy on behalf of the President through U.S. representation abroad, foreign assistance programs, countering international crime, foreign military training programs, and helping to protect the border of the United States.

<sup>4</sup>In this report we are not addressing children's issues, including child abduction and adoption, nor are we addressing mass casualty events, acts of terrorism, or kidnapping.

<sup>5</sup>Proof of citizenship includes having a valid U.S. passport, naturalization certificate, certificate of citizenship, or Consular Report of Birth Abroad. In addition to citizenship documents, a person's name must be cleared by the Consular Lookout and Support System, which determines if there are any outstanding federal warrants or any other possible bases for the denial of services. In the event that such documents have been lost or stolen, citizenship can be verified through the Passport Information Electronic Records System or American Citizens Services System.

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While U.S. citizens may seek assistance from State regarding American citizens overseas, the Privacy Act of 1974 limits what written, oral, and electronic information State can share about these citizens.<sup>6</sup> Among the protections the Privacy Act established for individuals, subject to certain exceptions, federal agencies, including State, are required to seek consent from a U.S. citizen before disclosing information held in a system of record regarding that person. Only after consent is received may information regarding a U.S. citizen be shared with family or friends, as well as other U.S. government agencies or private entities.<sup>7</sup> Exceptions include instances in which State deems that an American citizen's health and safety are in jeopardy.<sup>8</sup> Within Consular Affairs, the directorate of Overseas Citizen Services in Washington, D.C., is charged with protecting and providing services to U.S. citizens abroad.<sup>9</sup> Consular Affairs also has responsibility for several other activities, including issuing passports and visas (see fig. 1).<sup>10</sup> Within the Overseas Citizen Services, the Office of American Citizens Services and Crisis Management is responsible for providing emergency and routine services to U.S. citizens, and assistance during major crises such as the 2006 Lebanon evacuation.<sup>11</sup> The Office of American Citizens Services and Crisis Management is organized according to regional divisions that cover Africa; East Asia Pacific; Europe; Near East, South, and Central Asia; and the Western Hemisphere.

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<sup>6</sup>The Privacy Act of 1974, Pub. L. No. 93-579, 88 Stat. 1896, codified as amended at 5 U.S.C. § 552a.

<sup>7</sup>5 U.S.C. § 552a(b) (listing conditions of disclosure).

<sup>8</sup>5 U.S.C. § 552a(b)(8).

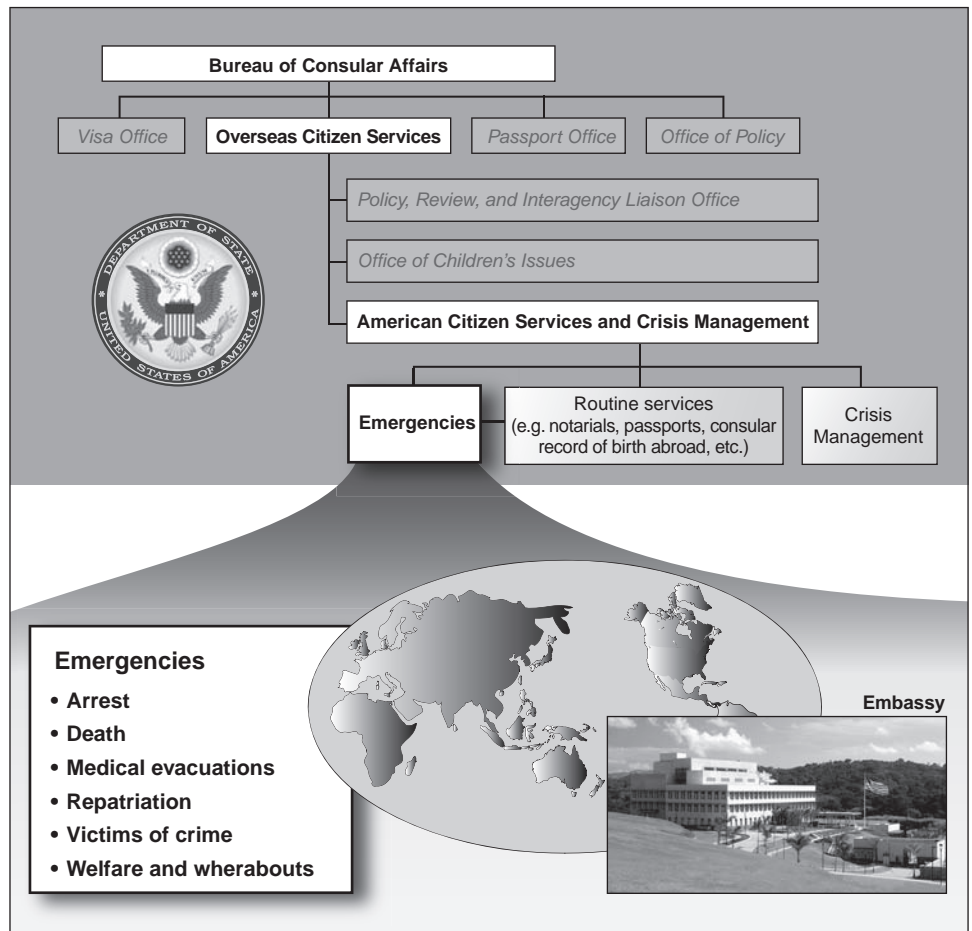
<sup>9</sup>State provides consular services in accordance with international and U.S. law. This includes the Vienna Convention on Consular Affairs, bilateral treaties between the United States and the host government, and the following U.S. statutes and regulations: 22 U.S.C. §§ 1731, 2671(b)(2)(A)(ii), 2671(b)(2)(B), 4802(b), 2715, 2715a; 22 C.F.R. §§ 71.1, 71.6.

<sup>10</sup>For previous GAO reports on consular operations see GAO, *Border Security: State Department Is Taking Steps to Meet Projected Surge in Demand for Visas and Passports in Mexico*, [GAO-08-1006](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 31, 2008); and *State Department: Comprehensive Strategy Needed to Improve Passport Operations*, [GAO-08-891](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 25, 2008).

<sup>11</sup>For previous GAO reports on emergency planning and evacuation see GAO, *State Department: Evacuation Planning and Preparations for Overseas Posts Can Be Improved*, [GAO-08-23](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 19, 2007); and *State Department: The July 2006 Evacuation of American Citizens from Lebanon*, [GAO-07-893R](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 7, 2007).



**Figure 1: Bureau of Consular Affairs Organizational Structure**



Sources: GAO and State Department; Map Resources (map); Corel (clip art).

Overseas, emergency services are provided by State's 267 embassies and consulates in 174 countries.<sup>12</sup> Emergency assistance and some basic consular services are also provided by 46 consular agencies, which are an extension of existing embassies and consulates and generally service locations that are far from a post but where a large number of U.S. citizens

<sup>12</sup>This includes missions to international organizations; the branch office of embassies, U.S. interest section; and American Presence Posts, which may not provide consular services, but may provide emergency services.

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live or visit.<sup>13</sup> For example, Mexico has 14 consular agencies in addition to its embassy in Mexico City and 9 consulates.

Approximately 5,000 people work in consular sections at posts overseas, according to Consular Affairs. Of these consular positions overseas, approximately 1,450 are FSOs, 3,000 are LES, and the remaining 550 are in other positions. Each post has a consular section that assists American citizens with services including routine and emergency services, and most consular sections also issue nonimmigrant visas. The ACS sections of these posts employ a variety of consular staff—FSOs, LES, employed family members, consular associates, consular agents, and Regional Consular Officers—to assist American citizens. Each consular section must have at least one FSO who provides management and oversight to the section and administers certain emergency services that only an FSO can provide, such as issuing a passport or a report of death.<sup>14</sup> LES perform much of the routine and administrative services provided by the section, and often assist FSOs with emergency services. In addition to FSOs and LES, some posts also employ family members and consular associates. Consular agencies are not assigned an FSO; rather they are assigned a consular agent, which is a noncareer appointee of the Foreign Service, who acts under the supervision and direction of the consular officer at the supervisory post.

The provision of emergency services overseas, as well as the support provided by Overseas Citizens Services in Washington, D.C., is funded through a mixture of sources including limited direct appropriations and various fees collected by State. According to State, for fiscal year 2008, Consular Affairs collected revenues exceeding \$2 billion of which it retained just over \$1 billion for its operating costs, with the remainder of the funds provided to the Department of the Treasury or shared with other bureaus in State.<sup>15</sup> The majority of funding for Consular Affairs comes

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<sup>13</sup>Consular agencies can also be located in places in which the United States does not have an embassy or consulate but may wish to have a consular presence. For example, the consular agency in the Cayman Islands is part of the consular district of the embassy in Kingston, Jamaica.

<sup>14</sup>Under some circumstances, such as during the transition of one FSO to another post, there may be no officer to conduct official business. Such occasions are infrequent, according to consular officials.

<sup>15</sup>In addition to the fees to fund Consular Affairs' operations, for fiscal year 2009 State's Congressional Budget Justification included approximately \$3.1 million for Consular Affairs; these funds support 17 positions located in Washington, D.C., and do not include the total for ACS operations overseas.

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from consular service fees, specifically Machine Readable Visa fees. These fees are collected and retained by Consular Affairs to fund consular operations domestically and overseas, and to fund part of the operations of the regional bureaus.<sup>16</sup> Consular Affairs was unable to provide us the amount of funding that specifically supports ACS operations both domestically and overseas because ACS costs are integrated into Consular Affairs' and the regional bureaus' total costs and not broken out separately.

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## State Provides a Variety of Emergency Services to Americans Abroad

State provides an extensive range of around-the-clock services to Americans in need of emergency assistance overseas. State also provides emergency information, through several means, to American travelers and citizens living abroad on travel and other information of concern, and maintains a warden system for disseminating information, which is particularly important in countries with poor communications infrastructure.

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## Types of Emergency Services

State provides a variety of services to assist American citizens who face emergencies while traveling or living abroad, including assistance to citizens involving deaths, arrests, financial and medical assistance, accidents and crimes, and inquiries into the welfare and whereabouts of citizens.

*Assistance in death cases:* According to State, providing assistance for the next of kin of a deceased American citizen abroad is one of the most important and difficult tasks for FSOs abroad. Since 2003, State has reported more than 48,000 death cases involving Americans abroad,<sup>17</sup> with more than 4,500 of those deaths attributed to nonnatural causes.<sup>18</sup> FSOs are required to endeavor to notify next of kin of the death of an American

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<sup>16</sup>State notifies Congress about the funds received from fees, and retains a portion of them for its operations, rather than depositing the fees in the Department of the Treasury and having to rely on appropriations for such operations.

<sup>17</sup>While our assessment of State's Consular Affairs data found weaknesses that we detail in objective 3, we determined that, in the aggregate, the data can give a general indication of the relative magnitude of the different ACS services provided between fiscal years 2003 and 2008.

<sup>18</sup>State identifies nonnatural deaths annually in the "Deaths by Non-Natural Causes" report, which is required in the Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Year 2003, Pub. L. No. 107-228, § 204, 116 Stat. 1350, 1363, codified at 22 U.S.C. § 2729. According to State, nonnatural deaths include deaths as a result of an accident, suicide, or homicide.

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citizen abroad as soon as possible and issue the report of death.<sup>19</sup> State regulations and training highlight the need to provide effective service, but also to exhibit empathy and understanding for the next of kin, who may be unfamiliar with the foreign laws governing death and the disposition of remains. State guidance indicates that FSOs should attempt to comply with the family's wishes to the extent possible, but must also comply with local regulations and laws, as well as U.S. laws, governing the identification of remains, the disposition of remains, and autopsies. For example, in the event that the death is a result of homicide, suicide, or an accident, the host country is responsible for investigating the death.<sup>20</sup> In addition, posts assist with and facilitate the disposition of the deceased's remains, while instructions and funds for this activity are the exclusive responsibility of the deceased's next of kin or legal representative.

- *Assistance to arrestees:* FSOs are charged with helping to maintain the legal and human rights of American citizens arrested and detained abroad, although American citizens may not be accorded the same rights and judicial processes they would receive under the U.S. judicial system. According to State data, approximately 25,000 American citizens worldwide were arrested overseas from fiscal year 2003 through 2008. The host country is generally required to inform a detained U.S. citizen of his right to consular notification and to perform such notification if requested if it is a party to the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations or has a bilateral treaty with the United States. For some countries, consular notification is required regardless of the U.S. detainee's wishes, and consular officers are typically granted the right to visit. Furthermore, State regulations require each post to initially visit or contact the citizen as soon as possible following consular notification or information about the arrest from another source, and visit prisoners after sentencing every 6 months; develop information on the judicial process of each country; and maintain an up-to-date list of attorneys

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<sup>19</sup>See 22 U.S.C. § 2715b and 22 C.F.R. § 72.5. A Report of Death is used by the next of kin in lieu of a U.S.-issued death certificate.

<sup>20</sup>The Federal Bureau of Investigation is not involved in the investigation of deaths of American citizens or citizens who are victims of crime overseas, unless (1) the citizen deaths are the result of terrorist activity, or (2) the host country government requests Federal Bureau of Investigation assistance with an investigation.

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who have indicated a willingness to represent American citizens.<sup>21</sup> During our visit overseas, we observed an FSO and an LES visit incarcerated American citizens on two occasions. They asked prisoners about their health, gave them vitamins, and asked if they needed assistance from the post. In one instance, a prisoner requested a new passport and the officer completed the application during the visit.

- *Medical assistance:* State may provide medical emergency loans to an American citizen in need of emergency medical or dietary assistance if the individual is destitute or incarcerated and cannot receive medical assistance. For example, in some countries prisoners must pay for medical assistance as well as food. According to State, approximately 5,300 citizens were provided emergency medical and dietary assistance loans from fiscal year 2003 through 2008. In addition, in circumstances where a citizen is critically injured or ill overseas and a local physician determines the citizen is stable for travel, consular officers assist families in arranging medical transportation and provide information regarding the policies and procedures for evacuating a citizen to the United States. State data show that over 5,000 American citizens received medical evacuations between fiscal years 2003 and 2008. For example, at one consulate we observed an FSO and an LES assist in the arrangement of a medical transport to the United States for a citizen who was injured in a traffic accident. Both the FSO and the LES worked with medical and local police officials to coordinate the medical transport and settle any demands with the other parties involved in the accident.
- *Financial assistance:* State provides loans to destitute American citizens to return to the United States. Prior to issuing a loan, the post is required to make attempts to find other parties, family members, or friends who might be willing to pay the costs, including transportation and temporary lodging. When no support can be found, the post may provide a loan. Until the loan is repaid, the citizen is barred from using or renewing his or her passport. From fiscal year 2003 through 2008, ACS provided approximately \$5.5 million in loans for over 4,000 cases; approximately 40 percent of the loans were repaid, according to State officials.<sup>22</sup> In addition, State may also

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<sup>21</sup>State has interpreted this requirement to mean that posts should attempt to visit an arrested American citizen within 24 hours. In circumstances in which it is not possible to visit an arrested American citizen within 24 hours, such as when the arrest occurred in a remote location, the officer should at a minimum make phone contact with the prisoner within 24 hours of being notified of the arrest and should attempt to visit the prisoner within 72 hours.

<sup>22</sup>State indicated that some loans are “written off,” generally when the person who received the loan died before repayment was completed.

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facilitate the transfer of funds from a family member or friend to a destitute American through an account established at State. The “trust” is funded by the family, and State disburses the funds to the individual overseas. Unused funds are returned to the family.

- *Assistance to victims of crime:* In cases of violent crimes committed against an American citizen, State addresses the emergency needs of the victim. In addition, FSOs and LES provide information on the country’s criminal justice system and, in general, ensure that the victim receives necessary services while in the country and is provided information on assistance that is available after returning to the United States. State created the Crime Victims’ Assistance Program in 2000 because the needs of victims involved in serious or violent crimes are notably different from other ACS cases; additionally, some states have programs to assist these victims once they return. The program focuses on assisting victims of serious crimes, including homicide, sexual assault, child abuse, domestic violence, armed robbery, assault, and kidnapping. Assistance to a victim is not conditioned on the prosecution of a crime or the certainty a crime occurred.
- *Welfare and whereabouts of U.S. citizens:* FSOs we met with indicated that inquiries regarding the welfare or whereabouts of American citizens overseas are the most common emergency assistance provided by posts. According to State data, consular officers helped concerned families and friends locate over 200,000 American citizens abroad annually from fiscal year 2003 through 2008. FSOs and LES will call local authorities, including police and immigration, as well as airlines, hotels, and hospitals, to locate a citizen. Although FSOs and LES may find, contact, and deliver a message to the citizen, the officials generally cannot disclose information about that person, even to the party that instigated the search, without the citizen’s consent due to requirements in the Privacy Act.

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## Emergency Assistance Provided at All Hours

Emergency assistance to American citizens is available and provided by posts at any time of day or night. During regular business hours, an American citizen can come to the post and request assistance. After hours, the duty officer, an embassy official who is on call nights and weekends, can be reached by phone, either directly via an emergency phone number or through the post’s guard station or operator, to handle emergencies such as death and arrest cases. Consular Affairs also maintains a duty officer in Washington, D.C., to respond to inquiries and emergencies both domestically and from posts during nonbusiness hours. Additionally, Consular Affairs contracts with a call center in Florida that handles both routine information requests and emergency calls. Emergency service-related calls are forwarded by the center to consular officials in

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Washington. According to call center data, from October through December 2008, 92 percent of the calls were during normal business hours and a small portion of these calls related to emergency services.<sup>23</sup> For example, 2 percent of the calls pertained to emergencies abroad, and less than 1 percent pertained to locating people abroad.

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### Travel and Emergency Information Is Provided by Consular Affairs through Several Mechanisms

Consular Affairs provides information to travelers and Americans living overseas through several of mechanisms. First, Consular Affairs provides a variety of information on its consular Web site.<sup>24</sup> Second, posts maintain a warden system, which is used to communicate with Americans living overseas. Third, in the event of an emergency, posts can directly contact those individuals who registered their trip with the post.

Specifically, the Consular Affairs Web site includes the following information:

- Country-specific information such as the embassy or consulate location and phone numbers in the host country, traffic and road safety information, health conditions, entry regulations, crime and security information, and drug penalties. The country-specific information is updated semiannually.
- Travel alerts that provide information on short-term conditions that pose immediate risks. They generally remain in place for 90 days or less.
- Travel warnings that describe long-term conditions that make countries unsafe or unstable, and are updated every 6 months. Warnings recommend that U.S. citizens defer or reconsider travel to a country.
- Information for people studying overseas.<sup>25</sup>

Embassies and consulates also maintain a warden system for American citizens living overseas. Wardens are typically American citizens who have lived in a country or region and have volunteered their assistance. They

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<sup>23</sup>Of the 23,333 calls between October 1 and December 31, 2008, nearly three-fourths sought routine information on topics such as passports and consular information.

<sup>24</sup>The Consular Affairs Web site can be found at [www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov).

<sup>25</sup>Information for people studying abroad can be found on State's Web site, "Students Abroad" <http://studentsabroad.state.gov/>

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distribute both routine messages, including information on absentee voting or income tax information, and emergency messages, and might help establish assembly areas and evacuation routes if necessary. Although communication has improved with the introduction of cell phones, e-mail, and text messaging, State nonetheless continues to maintain its warden system to ensure it can communicate with American citizens about events or threats that may affect their personal security.

Consular Affairs also provides a mechanism to register one's presence overseas. The Internet Based Registration System allows American citizens to provide information about their travels.<sup>26</sup> If an emergency occurs or there is a disaster, and the person has registered his or her whereabouts with the post, the post will attempt to contact the citizen if it becomes necessary. Registering travel overseas is optional and, according to Consular Affairs, most citizens do not register. About 1.8 million people have used the online registration system since it was launched in July 2004. According to Consular Affairs officials, posts are making efforts to increase registrations by American citizens. For example, at posts we visited, FSOs distributed handouts with registration information to American citizens and to travel agencies and hotels that serve American citizens, and included registration information on their Web sites.

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<sup>26</sup>The Internet Based Registration System can be found on State's Web site at <https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibrs/ui/>



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## Embassy and Consular Emergency Contact Information Could Be Improved

While State uses a variety of means, including Web sites, to provide information for American citizens in need of emergency assistance, emergency contact information is not immediately apparent on many embassy or consulate Web sites. State's main Web site has a link on its front page, under "Travel," that includes a subdirectory on emergency services, which includes emergency phone numbers to call from the United States or abroad (see fig. 2).

Figure 2: Travel and Emergency Services Information Located on State's Main Web site

The screenshot shows the U.S. Department of State website with the following elements:

- Top Navigation:** Multimedia | Blog | Subscribe | What's New | Contact Us | Archive | +BOOKMARK
- Search Bar:** Enter Search Term(s) | Search
- Subject Index:** Monday, August 10, 2009
- Main Menu:** Home | Press | Travel | Careers | Business | Youth & Education | About State
- Travel Dropdown Menu:**
  - Passports (U.S. Citizens)
  - Visas
  - Travel Warnings
  - Emergency services** (highlighted)
  - Countries and Regions
  - Foreign Per Diem Rates
  - More...
- Article Preview:** Secretary Clinton Visits ... (Aug. 8): "[W]e wanted to ... and see a ... community. So we came ... to sightsee. And ... are so proud to see the ... houses that are being ... because these are ... houses that will give ... and happiness to the ... families in them, and the ... men and the men who ... have built them. And ... very proud to see ... the progress that you ... made, and to know ... that because of your ... and this model, there ... are 50,000 houses built like this across South Africa." -Full Text -More on
- Text the Secretary:** Ask Secretary Clinton a question about her trip to Africa: U.S. 90822 Non-U.S.: 202-255-6299 | Online View Answers
- Social Media:** DipNote Blog, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, Twitter
- Quick Links:** Secretary Clinton, Remarks, Travel, Biography, Photos, Recovery Act, Passports, Visas, Travel Warnings, Daily Briefing, Per Diem Rates, A-Z Country Pages, Major Publications
- Multimedia:** Video, Photo Gallery, RSS, Subscribe

The secondary page, 'Emergency Assistance to American Citizens Abroad', contains the following information:

- Section:** Emergency Assistance to American Citizens Abroad
- How to Contact Us:**
  - OVERSEAS CITIZENS SERVICES:** Call 1-888-407-4747 (from overseas: 202-501-4444) for answers related to questions concerning the:
    - Death or Injury of an American citizen abroad
    - Arrest/detention of an American citizen abroad
    - Victims of crime abroad
    - American citizens missing abroad

Sources: GAO and State Department.

Emergency contact information, however, is not readily available on many individual posts' main Web site page, which, according to a senior Consular Affairs official, is a best practice posts are encouraged to follow. Consular Affairs guidance directs posts to provide the phone numbers for

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ACS during business hours, and indicates that, if the number is different for emergency calls during nonbusiness hours, it should be identified as an emergency number. Based on a random sample of embassy and consulate Web sites,<sup>27</sup> we estimate that 14 percent had the post's phone number on the main page of its Web site.<sup>28</sup> In addition, none of these Web sites identified the phone number as an emergency assistance number. In order to identify the emergency contact information, we had to search the post's Web site. While all of the posts in our sample had emergency contact information posted on the ACS portion of the Web site, Consular Affairs has experienced problems in the past with some of the information on the ACS sites being outdated or incorrect. In one instance, an agency other than State received welfare and whereabouts inquiries from an American citizen who found the agency's e-mail address listed on the consulate Web site, but the inquiries were not forwarded to the ACS section. After the incident, the post removed the agency's e-mail address from the Consulate Web site. In another instance, the emergency number for the post was correct, but once the post was reached, the emergency contact number for the duty officer did not work. In addition to post Web sites lacking contact information, some sites also contained incorrect information on other topics. For example, two other posts listed incorrect information regarding the number of reports of death abroad that can be obtained from the post free of charge.

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<sup>27</sup>We drew a random sample of embassy and consulate Web sites. Because our sample selection was based on random selections, it was only one of a large number of samples that might have been drawn. Since each sample could have produced different estimates, we express our confidence in the precision of our particular sample's results as a 95 percent confidence interval. This is the interval that would contain the actual population value for 95 percent of the samples we could have drawn. As a result, we are 95 percent confident that the confidence interval in this report will include the true value in the study population. See app. I for additional information on the sample.

<sup>28</sup>Based on a 95 percent confidence interval, we estimate that no more than 26 percent of the Web sites would include a phone number on the main page.

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## State's Ability to Provide Emergency Services Depends on Having Trained and Experienced Consular Staff

State relies on a cadre of trained consular staff to provide assistance to U.S. citizens in need of emergency services. Some staff may rotate through the ACS section at a larger post, whereas at smaller posts, the consular officer may be the sole provider of all consular services, including emergency services. LES are a key component of posts' provision of emergency services, as is State's ability to move both FSOs and LES from post to post when emergencies arise. State provides guidance, training, and other resources to ensure staff are able to carry out these services.

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## A Post's Size, Rotational Policy, and Experience Levels Affect the Provision of Emergency Services

The size of a post and number of FSOs and LES assigned to the consular section affect whether staff specialize in the provision of emergency services or rotate among various consular activities. For example, at large posts, such as those in Mexico City and Guadalajara, Mexico, FSOs and LES may specialize within the ACS section working either on emergency or routine services. Furthermore, the FSOs and LES may be assigned to specific emergency activities, such as making prison visits, handling death cases, or managing welfare and whereabouts cases. In contrast, at small posts that may have one or two FSOs, the FSOs are more likely to be responsible for all consular-related activities, such as ACS duties both routine and emergency, and may even split time between sections at the post. For example, at one post we visited, one of the two FSOs split his time between the consular and political sections.

Larger posts may also have a rotational policy under which entry-level FSOs—FSOs on their first or second overseas tour—work in the ACS section for only a brief time. Although State does not have an established mandatory post rotational schedule or policy, the posts we visited typically had FSOs on 6-month rotations, which provided them the opportunity to experience all the different facets of the consular sections, such as providing ACS services, conducting visa interviews, and issuing passports. Both FSOs and LES we interviewed indicated that the rotating staff must complete a training period of a few weeks in the ACS section before an FSO can perform and provide emergency services independently. Senior-level FSOs and Consular Affairs officials stated that the rotations are important developmental opportunities that provide a comprehensive consular experience for entry-level FSOs.

The experience level of FSOs performing ACS emergency services may differ based on the size of the embassy or consulate. Larger posts generally have a hierarchy of FSOs, some of whom have extensive experience and can guide inexperienced officers. For example, the

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embassy in Berlin has a Minister Counselor who oversees all consular services in Germany, an FSO who is also the head of the consular and ACS sections, and an entry-level FSO for ACS. Nine of the 12 posts we visited had mid- or senior-level ACS FSOs that managed and interacted with staff, and we also observed mid- and senior-level FSOs assisting American citizens directly. In contrast, smaller posts may only have one or two officers with limited Foreign Service experience. For example, at many small posts in Africa, the FSOs are on their first or second overseas assignment, according to Consular Affairs officials. To address the lack of experience, FSOs at these posts receive guidance from staff in Washington or from a Regional Consular Officer. Regional Consular Officers are assigned to provide support to small posts and conduct assessments of a post's consular operations, as well as advise, train, and support the post's less-experienced FSOs.<sup>29</sup>

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## LES Are Integral to Posts' Provision of Emergency Services

LES are integral to posts' provision of emergency services, since they generally have years of experience assisting American citizens in need of emergency services, speak the local language, and understand the local culture and political and legal policies. These LES are also familiar with State's policies and procedures and, according to Consular Affairs officials and FSOs at posts we visited, provide the post with institutional knowledge and continuity. In general, the posts we visited had LES who had worked in the consular section for years. For example, in Berlin, Germany, three of the four LES had worked in the ACS section for more than 20 years; in Beijing, China, two LES had worked in the ACS section for 8 and 11 years respectively; and in Johannesburg, South Africa, the senior LES had worked at the post for 25 years.

According to LES at posts we visited, a LES is often the first person an American citizen encounters at a post, handling initial discussions on issues ranging from welfare and whereabouts to arrests and deaths. LES may use their local contacts to check hospitals, police, and hotels to address a welfare and whereabouts call, or may assist with prison visits, including sending the notification of visit request and accompanying the FSO to the prison. According to an FSO, LES also conduct much of the administrative work associated with emergency services and therefore are often familiar with many of the details associated with a case, enabling

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<sup>29</sup>These assessments are not formal audits or inspections, although Regional Consular Officers do make recommendations to improve consular operations at posts.

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them to provide continuity concerning case information for families and the department in spite of FSO departures or rotations to other posts.

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### State Has the Flexibility to Move FSOs and LES to ACS in Emergencies

Although not all ACS sections have a large number of FSOs and LES, Consular Affairs reported that it has the flexibility to move these individuals in an emergency. FSOs and LES may be moved from one part of the consular section to the ACS section when an emergency necessitates more resources, as was confirmed at posts we visited and consistently reiterated by Consular Affairs officials. For example, according to the Minister Counselor of Consular Affairs in Mexico, in response to a hurricane in 2008, two consulates in Mexico reduced nonimmigrant visa appointments and moved FSOs and LES within the consular sections to respond to an increase in emergency services. FSOs from other posts may also be temporarily reassigned to assist another post. For example, during the Summer Olympics in Beijing in 2008, the Beijing post received FSOs from 10 posts, including Japan, Latvia, and Turkey, according to an FSO at the embassy.

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### State Provides Guidance and Training to Assist Consular Staff Provide Emergency Services

To support the provision of emergency services by FSOs and LES posted overseas, State provides specific guidance through the FAM, which takes into account the flexibility needed to address case- and country-specific details, according to Consular Affairs officials.<sup>30</sup> For example, the FAM provides step-by-step procedures on making death notifications, but also recognizes the importance of being familiar with the laws and practices of the host country regarding such issues as disposition of remains, autopsies, and issuance of death certificates, as it is the host country's practices that dictate how a death case will be handled. The FAM describes every type of emergency service provided by ACS, and outlines what FSOs and LES can and cannot do. While the section of the FAM dealing with emergency services is over 800 pages long, it is online and searchable. According to Consular Affairs officials, the department sends cables notifying posts when significant changes to the FAM occur, and State's intranet site also has a section dealing with updates to the FAM.

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<sup>30</sup>Chapter 7 of the FAM is the main guide on emergency services. The Foreign Affairs Handbook also provides guidance, although its focus on the provision of emergency-related activities is limited, according to Consular Affairs officials.

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In addition to the FAM, some posts develop their own tailored guidance, such as specific standard operating procedures, which incorporate country-specific information, as well as handbooks for the duty officers performing emergency assistance (referred to as a duty book). The standard operating procedures are based on regulations and FAM guidance, but may allow an FSO to find guidance more easily than by searching the FAM. For example, the standard operating procedure for arrests for the embassy in Beijing indicates which FSOs and LES are assigned to these cases; designates the responsibilities for prison visits and administrative tasks; describes the notification and visitation process, including obtaining a Privacy Act waiver; and details other specific administrative requirements. In addition, every post is required to develop and maintain a duty book, which is intended to contain concise instructions, advice, and references to regulations on the types of cases or situations that may arise outside of business hours and that the duty officer may not have prior experience addressing, since not all duty officers work in the consular section at post.<sup>31</sup> The duty book also generally contains the phone numbers of the ACS FSOs and often indicates that the duty officer should call the head of the ACS section or an FSO in the consular section if unsure how to handle a situation. Our review of duty books from the posts we visited found that all contained instructions on calling the head of the ACS section if the duty officer was unsure how to respond to a call.

According to State officials, State also requires that FSOs and LES receive training to provide emergency services, which includes both mandatory and voluntary training for both FSOs and LES that perform ACS duties, provided by the Foreign Service Institute either in the United States or abroad.<sup>32</sup> For example, prior to an assignment abroad, every entry-level FSO is required to attend the mandatory 6-week basic consular course, which focuses on all consular services and, according to State officials, includes 6 days devoted to the provision of ACS emergency services. According to State officials, LES must also take certain consular courses such as the consular correspondence course on the Laws and Regulations

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<sup>31</sup>The basic information contained in the duty book is outlined in the FAM. 2 FAM 113.8 addresses the requirements of the duty officer guide.

<sup>32</sup>Fourteen courses offered by the Foreign Service Institute contain ACS-related content, although not of all of them are relevant to emergency services, such as the courses on Nationality Laws and Regulations With Regard To Consular Procedures, and Fraud Prevention for Consular Officers.

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Regarding Overseas Citizens Services.<sup>33</sup> The course is designed to help LES understand the large and complex body of laws and regulations regarding services for American citizens overseas. In addition, newly hired consular agents are required to attend ACS-related portions of the basic consular course at the Foreign Service Institute within 6 months of receiving their appointments. State has additional training focused primarily on ACS, including a course on Assisting Victims of Crime and a workshop on ACS designed for LES.

Despite the emphasis placed on formal training, the entry-level FSOs we spoke with indicated that on-the-job training was the primary means by which they learned what is involved in providing emergency services, including the associated policies and procedures. For example, according to an FSO, although the FAM provides guidance about making a death notification to the next of kin, the challenges encountered in the situation are difficult to understand until an FSO performs such a notification. The FSOs indicated that on-the-job training and shadowing of more experienced ACS officers—or, at smaller posts, learning from Regional Consular Officers—were the most effective means of ACS training. The Regional Consular Officers we met with indicated that they also identify and recommend training opportunities for FSOs and LES based on needs they identified during their site visits.

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## Consular Affairs’ Mechanisms to Monitor the Provision of Emergency Services Have Limitations

The Bureau of Consular Affairs has a variety of mechanisms at the post level to monitor its provision of emergency services to U.S. citizens. These mechanisms include the ACS system, consular package reports, Regional Consular Officer reviews, and consultations between Consular Affairs and consular management at posts. However, ACS data in both the ACS system and consular package reports are unreliable owing to incomplete and inaccurate data case entry by posts. In addition, the ACS system has functional problems that hamper producing accurate reports. As a result, Consular Affairs and posts have difficulty using the ACS system’s data to plan workload and make resource allocation decisions. Further, Consular Affairs does not have adequate information to comprehensively monitor and evaluate its provision of services worldwide, and therefore does not know the global demand for its services or if it is allocating its resources effectively.

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<sup>33</sup>Other LES-required courses include Nationality Laws and Regulations With Regard To Consular Procedures.



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## The ACS System Tracks Emergency Services Provided Overseas and Domestically

The ACS system is a case management tracking system that is employed worldwide and can be accessed by posts and in Washington, D.C.<sup>34</sup> Posts and staff both overseas and in Washington, D.C., use the ACS system to maintain and organize information regarding cases and to track their workload. The system is organized around nine categories of service; some are routine, such as issuing a report of birth abroad or a passport, and others are related to emergency services. Posts and staff in Washington, D.C., use the ACS system to maintain and organize information regarding a case. According to Consular Affairs officials, information in the ACS system constitutes State's official record of a case and, according to the FAM, all "significant" details regarding a case should be entered into the system. For example, if a person is arrested and sentenced to prison overseas, details about the case, including when and where the arrest occurred, the charges, the length of the sentence, and the post's first prison visit should be included in the ACS system.

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## The ACS System Has Data Reliability and Functional Problems Limiting Its Utility

Data in the ACS system are unreliable due to incomplete and inaccurate data case entry by posts. We found that not all ACS cases are being entered into the ACS system. Consular Affairs officials stated that not all the welfare and whereabouts cases are entered into the system, which results in incomplete reporting. According to the Embassy in Jakarta, Indonesia, the post's workload statistics for the first three quarters of 2008 were underrepresented because several welfare and whereabouts cases it handled had not been entered into the ACS system. Furthermore, despite clear guidance in the FAM that posts are supposed to close out financial assistance cases in the ACS system 72 hours after a case has been completed, 25 percent of posts do not close out such cases, according to the Consular Affairs officer responsible for tracking financial assistance cases. As a result of cases remaining open, Consular Affairs is unable to determine how much money was borrowed, how much has been returned, and how much is still owed to the U.S. government. For example, Consular Affairs noted that at the end of the first quarter of fiscal year 2009, there was more than \$115,000 of authorized funds still not fully disbursed or accounted for in the ACS system because some cases had not been closed.

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<sup>34</sup>Posts wishing to edit a case that was created in another country must request access to the case information from the post that created the case. Consular agencies, however, do not have access to the ACS system since they operate in unsecured locations. Information pertaining to cases in a consular agency's area is shared with and inputted by its supervising post.

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The system's lack of reliable data is partly attributable to unclear guidance regarding whether certain kinds of information should be entered into the system. A number of the officials at posts we visited stated there is a lack of guidance on this issue and, as a result, not all ACS cases are being entered into the ACS system. First, the FAM does not make it clear when reporting case information through the ACS system is required and when it is not. For example, the FAM section dealing with reporting cases related to court trials states that "significant actions should be reported."<sup>35</sup> However, "significant" is not defined, which could affect the number of reports submitted, as officers' interpretation of what is significant may differ. Second, the FAM requires that officers report through the ACS system on some types of cases, but not for others. For example, in death and victims' assistance cases, as well as cases that involve financial or medical assistance, the FAM indicates what must be reported in the ACS system, whereas there is no reference in the FAM to entry of data into the ACS system on welfare and whereabouts cases.<sup>36</sup> Rather, this is left to the discretion of FSOs, according to Consular Affairs officials.

In addition to the ACS system's lack of reliable data, functional difficulties in generating reports from the system further limit the usefulness of its data as a management tool for the posts. Many of the posts we visited indicated they do not use the ACS system reports to track their workload because the system often crashes when printing reports and the reports are not always accurate. For example, when we asked posts in Germany and Thailand during our visits to provide us a report listing the open and closed victims' assistance or death statistics cases from 2003 through 2008, their computers crashed several times while attempting to produce the reports. Posts also noted that the reports the ACS system generates are not always accurate, limiting their usefulness as a management tool. For example, at eight of the posts we visited, reports for open and closed victims' assistance cases for 2003 through 2008 were identical, even though the cases listed in these reports should be mutually exclusive. At the ninth post, the reports contained incorrect data—closed cases appeared on the open case report and open cases appeared on the closed cases report. In order to determine which cases were closed and which were open, LES stated they relied on their local files rather than the ACS system reports.

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<sup>35</sup>7 FAM 450 and 455.

<sup>36</sup>Reporting on deaths and victims' assistance cases is required by statute. 22 U.S.C. § 2729, 22 U.S.C. § 2715b,

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Many of the posts we visited created additional systems for tracking emergency services, an inefficient use of resources necessitated by the problems and limitations with the ACS system. In particular, a number of the posts created spread sheets to track death and arrest cases. For example, Bangkok kept a spread sheet with the names of American citizens who had died and for whom next of kin were present and another list of citizens for whom next of kin needed to be identified and contacted, along with the name of an LES assigned to handle the case. In addition, some of the posts we visited maintained a spreadsheet to track prison visits for arrested and incarcerated American citizens, since the ACS system does not produce a report containing this information. Consular officers indicated that the prison spreadsheet assisted the post in complying with the requirements for arrest cases, and one consular officer stated that the spreadsheets helped the post maintain continuity in visitations when staff turnover occurred.

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### Data in the Consular Package Are Unreliable and Affect Consular Affairs' Ability to Evaluate Its Workload

Consular package reports, which are Consular Affairs' main tool for making resource allocation decisions for consular operations abroad, also lack reliable data; as a result, Consular Affairs does not know if it is effectively allocating its resources. The data in Consular Package reports are unreliable in part because certain sections of the reports are prepopulated with emergency services data obtained from the ACS system, which, as noted above, is unreliable. In other instances, we identified discrepancies in the consular package emergency services data that could not be explained.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, limitations with the guidance regarding what information should be entered into the consular package report hamper the data's reliability.

Problems with the consular package reports' reliability are partially attributed to errors with the prepopulated data obtained from the ACS system. In particular, FSOs at posts we visited informed us that data directly transferred from the ACS system to the consular package reports, such as the number of arrest and death cases, were often incorrect. For example, FSOs at several of the posts we visited told us they needed to correct arrest and death case data that had been provided in the consular package. As a result, Consular Affairs cannot rely on the numbers that appear in the consular package without first having posts verify the data.

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<sup>37</sup>The Consular Package system contains data other than emergency services data; we did not assess the reliability of the nonemergency services data.

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We also found variations in the consular package data that called into question its reliability. For example, data from the consular package system showed variations over time that Consular Affairs could not explain, such as:

- FSOs in Tijuana, Mexico, performed over 10,000 hours of emergency services in 2003, 644 hours in 2004, and more than 8,000 hours in 2005.
- In London, England, the number of hours spent on public inquiries fluctuated substantially over several years—from 4,861 in 2004, to 200 in 2006, to 5,160 in 2008.
- In Oslo, Norway, the number of emergency services hours performed by both consular officers and LES dropped from 1,700 hours in 2004, to zero in 2005, and then increased to 500 in 2006.

Discrepancies with emergency services data, such as deaths and arrests, that Consular Affairs provided to us for fiscal year 2003 through 2008 further illustrated reliability problems with its data.<sup>38</sup> For example, State initially reported there were 5,332 arrests in fiscal year 2007, but our analysis of the consular package data indicated the number was 3,915. After reviewing our analysis, Consular Affairs officials indicated that some of the differences we identified were due to system errors, specifically that data from the consular agencies were not included in the figures they initially provided us. Consular Affairs reran the arrest data, and the number of arrests decreased to 4,487 for fiscal year 2007.

Additional problems with the reliability of the data may be attributed to limitations associated with the guidance for inputting information into the consular package. In response to the variations in the data we noted above, Consular Affairs officials stated that some differences might be due to different people inputting the data from year to year and interpreting what information should be included differently. Consular Affairs is aware that discrepancies exist between the data posts collect and the data in the consular package system. One reason, according to Consular Affairs, is that workload queries to the system conducted by posts may not be run at the same time or in the same manner as Consular Affairs' workload queries, resulting in differences in the data. Nonetheless, Consular Affairs

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<sup>38</sup>Consular Affairs obtained the data from the system that produces consular package reports, and the ACS system.

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has not provided clear guidance on the appropriate time frame for running queries to address this discrepancy. We also found that a lack of clarity about defining certain work activities led to some activities being categorized differently from year to year based on changes to the guidance. For example, in 2007, a post in Sweden reported its actual workload concerning “Other Special Citizen Services cases” remained generally the same from fiscal year 2006, but was represented as dropping significantly in the consular package report due to a misinterpretation of the category’s definition.

Consular Affairs has taken steps to compensate for the data limitations in the consular packages. First, Consular Affairs sends consular package reports to all posts and asks them to verify or correct the data in the report. Several posts we visited indicated that they correct the data in the consular package during the annual review process. In addition, Consular Affairs includes narrative questions in the consular package report where posts can supplement the workload data by providing information about their activities and needs. However, according to a Consular Affairs official not all questions are repeated from year to year, making it difficult to determine how activities or issues identified by posts one year are addressed the next year or if the activity or issue persists. Further, according to Consular Affairs officials, they do not aggregate the data because posts may interpret questions differently. Nonetheless, the bureau uses the additional information when making resource allocation decisions.

State also has problems estimating the number of work hours associated with providing emergency services, which further contributes to the reliability issues associated with consular package data. Consular Affairs recognizes that ACS work hours are estimates and inherently difficult to calculate. Unlike work hours for other consular operations, no two emergency cases are the same and the hours spent addressing two similar cases can vary widely.<sup>39</sup> Further, whereas some consular services, such as adjudicating a visa, usually entail a relatively specific and predictable series of steps (an application, interview, and adjudication), victims’ assistance cases can vary from assault and domestic violence to robbery and rape, and the amount of time spent on cases can vary depending on the complexity of the crime and the country in which the crime occurred.

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<sup>39</sup>For example, a death case in which the next of kin is present generally requires less time to address than a death case in which the next of kin is unknown.

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In addition, not all hours devoted to emergency services are captured in the consular package data since, according to Consular Affairs officials, posts do not include the ACS work hours performed by duty officers that provide emergency services outside of normal business hours. Consular Affairs generally gives posts wide latitude in determining how to estimate the time they spent annually on the provision of emergency services, and post estimates can therefore vary widely.

To compensate for weaknesses with the work hour estimates, the bureau is trying to develop measures that more accurately convey workload and reflect the complexity of the various types of emergency assistance. In addition, Consular Affairs officials stated they are developing a measure to capture a post's outreach efforts, as it considers outreach useful in educating American citizens on how to avoid situations that might necessitate emergency assistance. For example, Consular Affairs recently studied the feasibility of tracking the time consular staff spend on providing emergency services during nonbusiness hours. The study highlighted the significant workload associated with such services, but also revealed that tracking this time is itself a time-consuming process.

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## The Regional Consular Officer Program Provides Oversight to Selected Small Posts

Regional Consular Officers are tasked with monitoring and evaluating all consular operations, including the provision of emergency services, through periodic visits to selected small posts and reports on the findings of those visits.<sup>40</sup> Currently, there are 90 posts covered by the Regional Consular Officer program, and Regional Consular Officers have a minimum of 10 posts assigned to them. The Regional Consular Officer's reports are not used to identify trends that may be applied globally; rather they focus on individual problems at posts. The reports also generally have a common format, which includes an overview section and post staffing levels, followed by more detailed information on those areas the Regional Consular Officers focused on during their visit.<sup>41</sup> Our review of 43 Regional Consular Officer trip reports from 2008 and 2009 found varying levels of detail regarding emergency services, making it difficult to systematically

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<sup>40</sup>State's Office of the Inspector General also conducts inspections on consular services at posts; however, the inspections generally have focused on activities other than the provision of emergency services. Likewise, Consular Affairs Consular Management Assistance Teams conduct evaluations of consular post operations, generally at the invitation of a post, and these reports generally do not focus on the provision ACS emergency services.

<sup>41</sup>All of the Regional Consular Officer reports we reviewed followed the same format.

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identify problems based on these reports.<sup>42</sup> Regional Consular Officers may not always review a post's emergency services, as their reports primarily focus on management controls and other activities where the potential for fraud or abuse has significant security and other ramifications, according to a Regional Consular Officer. In addition, the officer stated that if there isn't much written about emergency services in a report, it is because no issues were identified during the visit.

Though Regional Consular Officers indicated they share information and lessons learned among themselves and with their supervisor, their reports are not systematically analyzed by Consular Affairs in order to ascertain if consular operations could be improved worldwide. The Supervisory Regional Consular Officer in Cairo, Egypt, is responsible for clearing the other Regional Consular Officer's reports, and may therefore see themes and identify vulnerabilities in the various regions or across regions.<sup>43</sup> However, according to the Supervisory Regional Consular Officer, he has not conducted a systematic review of the reports, and while Consular Affairs also reviews the Regional Consular Officer reports, it does not systematically analyze them to ascertain if consular operations could be improved worldwide. Although the reports are not systematically analyzed, the Regional Consular Officers themselves reported that they meet annually to discuss their work and share lessons learned, identifying common problems or themes. They also routinely share information via phone calls and e-mails. Additionally, there is a Regional Consular Officer Web site, available to all posts, which contains such information as examples of standard operating procedures and responses to questions posed by posts.

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**Consultations with Posts Provide Useful Information but Are Not Required**

According to Consular Affairs officials, supplementing the information provided by the ACS system, consular packages, and Regional Consular Officer reports are consultations Consular Affairs holds with consular and post management regarding their staffing and resource needs. Consultations occur either when consular management visit Washington, D.C., or when Consular Affairs officers visit posts; however, the

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<sup>42</sup>We requested all of the Regional Consular Officer trip reports from 2003 through 2008 and were told they were not available electronically; however, State provided us with 43 reports.

<sup>43</sup>The Supervisory Regional Consular Officer also had 12 countries in the region where he conducts Regional Consular Officer reviews.

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consultations were not mandatory or routine. Consular Affairs recognized the value of providing these consultations, and Consular Affairs recently standardized the practice for outgoing consular officers, Deputy Chiefs of Mission, and U.S. Ambassadors.

Consular Affairs may also contact a post when reviewing its consular package submission to obtain additional information regarding its resource requests, or seek the opinion of Regional Consular Officers regarding workload and resource allocations given their broad perspective on such post issues. While the information gathered during these consultations is factored into resource allocation decisions, such consultations are not regularly conducted with all posts and therefore cannot be used to systematically evaluate post needs.

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### Consular Affairs Does Not Have Adequate Information to Comprehensively Monitor Its Provision of Emergency Services

Consular Affairs does not have adequate information to comprehensively monitor its provision of emergency services worldwide, largely due to the difficulty of developing meaningful measures, and the limitations associated with Consular Affairs' existing monitoring mechanisms, such as the ACS system. As a result, the bureau does not know the global demand for its services or if it is allocating its resources effectively. The overall number of cases addressed by posts overseas does not provide a complete picture of the level of effort expended by posts, since the measure does not reflect the complexity of the cases. Additionally, the number of hours spent on emergency service cases does not provide a sense of the types of emergencies posts address and whether or not the need for emergency services may be increasing. In addition to the difficulty of developing meaningful measures, mechanisms such as the ACS system and consular package, as discussed earlier in this report, do not provide Consular Affairs with reliable and complete data to assess the global demand for emergency services. Consular Affairs officials informed us that the bureau has an initiative under way to see how it might use the data it collects to identify trends related to the provision of emergency and consular services globally. However, as this initiative is ongoing, we were not able to assess it.

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## Conclusions

While State provides a wide range of emergency services to American citizens overseas, State's ability to comprehensively analyze the global demand for these services is hampered by limitations with its data systems. For example, reporting weaknesses and unclear guidance associated with the ACS system prevent posts from monitoring and evaluating their workload or using the data to make management decisions. Moreover, limitations associated with Consular Affairs'



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monitoring mechanisms, combined with the inherent difficulty of measuring emergency service activities, prevent Consular Affairs from having a clear understanding of the global demand for emergency services. Although State shifts consular resources to meet emergency service demands, such as in the case of the Mumbai bombings, resource allocation, training, and planning decisions may not be based on a clear understanding of global workload. Absent current and reliable data on this worldwide demand for emergency services, Consular Affairs will continue to make resource allocation decisions based on incomplete and unreliable data. In addition, Consular Affairs views posts' Web sites as its main outreach mechanism; it is therefore imperative that American citizens are able to quickly find emergency services information on these Web sites. However, the vast majority of posts' Web sites do not contain emergency contact information on their main pages, forcing individuals to navigate through many Web sites at posts to get basic emergency contact information, and increasing the risk these individuals will not obtain these services in a timely fashion, or at all.

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## Recommendations for Executive Action

To ensure the Bureau of Consular Affairs has accurate and reliable data from the mechanisms used to monitor and evaluate its provision of emergency services worldwide, and therefore make informed resource allocation decisions, we recommend that the Secretary of State direct the Bureau of Consular Affairs to take the following two actions:

- provide guidance on the information to be entered into the ACS system to ensure that data are consistently captured across posts and accurately reflect workload, and
- improve functionality in the ACS system so that Consular Affairs and posts can use the system more effectively.

To ensure American citizens who experience an emergency overseas can easily find and identify emergency contact information on post Web sites, we are making the following two recommendations to the Secretary of State:

- require posts' main Web site pages to include emergency contact information, and
- periodically test the accuracy of the emergency contact information provided on the posts' main Web site pages.

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## Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

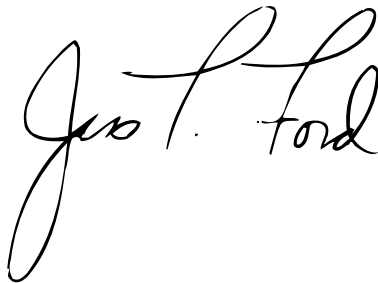
In written comments on a draft of this report, State concurred with our conclusions and recommendations. State indicated that it is developing new FAM guidance which will focus on reporting and provide clear guidelines on what information to enter into the ACS system. State indicated it is also working to improve the ACS system, as well as the data system that provides information for the consular package, and it will release a new version of the software for testing in November 2009. In addition, State indicated it is developing a new Global Citizens Services project, which should be implemented by 2014, and is supposed to facilitate case tracking, ease data entry requirements, and include appropriate management tools.

State also agreed to make emergency contact information easily accessible for U.S. citizens abroad and in the United States on post-controlled Web sites and to periodically test the accuracy of the emergency contact information. State also indicated it will provide links to such information on both its main Web site and on the Bureau of Consular Affairs Web site. Finally, the Bureau of Consular Affairs noted it plans to undertake a major redesign of its main Web site, <http://travel.state.gov>, beginning in September 2009. Ensuring better access to emergency assistance information is supposed to be a redesign priority and should be implemented in the first quarter of fiscal year 2010, with other changes to the site completed over the remaining part of the fiscal year.

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We are sending copies of this report to interested congressional committees and the Department of State. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO Web site at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staffs have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-4268 or [fordj@gao.gov](mailto:fordj@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made major contributions to this report are listed in appendix III.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jess Ford". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J" and a distinct "F".

Jess Ford  
Director, International Affairs and Trade

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*List of Requesters*

The Honorable Edolphus Towns  
Chairman

The Honorable Darrell Issa  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Oversight  
and Government Reform  
House of Representatives

The Honorable Henry Waxman  
House of Representatives

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# Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

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We examined (1) the emergency services that the Department of State (State) provides U.S. citizens, (2) how State is prepared to assist U.S. citizens in need of emergency services, and (3) how State monitors the assistance it provides U.S. citizens in need of emergency services.

To describe the services State provides to U.S. citizens who are the victims of crimes, suffer accidents, or otherwise need emergency services overseas, we interviewed State officials from the Bureau of Consular Affairs, including officials from the Office of Overseas Citizens Services. We also reviewed State guidance, specifically the Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM) chapter dealing with Consular Protection of U.S. Nationals Abroad, as well as other relevant sections of the FAM pertaining to the Bureau of Consular Affairs, Consular Agents, the Regional Consular Officer Program, and the Warden System. We also reviewed the relevant sections of the Foreign Affairs Handbook, including guidance to Consular Agents and Regional Consular Officers, as well as Duty Officer Guidance and Crisis Preparedness. We also reviewed additional State guidance, including cables, pertaining to the provision of emergency services, including preparation of the report estimating the number of Americans who might need to be evacuated during a crisis, new procedures for death notification, closing out financial records, and support for victims of crime overseas. In addition, we reviewed international agreements such as the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations and bilateral Mutual Legal Assistance Treaties related to criminal matters. We also reviewed Memoranda of Understanding between State and the Federal Bureau of Investigation and State and the Department of Justice pertaining to victims of terrorism and crime. To identify the presence of emergency contact information available on embassy and consulate Web sites, we conducted a simple random sample of 70 Web sites. One of the posts was deemed out of scope, leaving us with a final sample size of 69. We selected the sample from a list of 239 embassies and consulates that provide American Citizen Services (ACS) identified by State in their consular packages. Because our sample selection was based on random selection, it was only one of a large number of samples that might have been drawn. Since each sample could have produced different estimates, we express our confidence in the precision of our particular sample's results as a 95 percent confidence interval. Based on the confidence interval, we estimate that no less than 7 percent of the Web sites and no more than 26 percent of the Web sites include contact information on the main page of posts' Web sites. We traveled overseas to five countries and 12 posts to observe how emergency assistance is provided at posts, including Beijing and Guangzhou, China; Berlin and Frankfurt, Germany; Mexico City, Guadalajara, Matamoros, and

Puerto Vallarta, Mexico; Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Thailand; and Cape Town and Johannesburg, South Africa. We interviewed ACS officials at all these posts including the Minister Counselor for Consular Affairs in Beijing, Berlin, and Mexico City as well as the ACS chiefs at all posts we visited. We also interviewed other ACS officers including entry-level officers and locally employed staff who are responsible for the provision of ACS emergency services at their respective posts, as well as several duty officers to learn about the training and guidance they received prior to providing emergency services during nonbusiness hours. Additionally, we interviewed management and budget analysts from the Bureau of Consular Affairs, and division directors, desk officers, and management within the office of Overseas Citizen Services, in Washington, D.C.

To describe and assess how State is prepared to assist U.S. citizens in need of emergency services, we interviewed State officials from the Bureau of Consular Affairs regarding the process for determining resource allocations to posts and other offices that provide emergency services. We also interviewed ACS staff, Foreign Service officers, locally employed staff, and post management including Consuls General at several posts, and the Chargé d’Affairs and Deputy Chief of Mission in China, to ascertain how posts manage their emergency services workload. To assess the training provided by State we interviewed officials from the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) and obtained records pertaining to FSI courses that focus on ACS emergency-related services for both Foreign Service officers and locally employed staff. We also reviewed overseas and online training opportunities for both Foreign Service officers and locally employed staff provided by FSI, and we also attended FSI’s training course on Assisting Victims of Crime, held in January 2009 in Arlington, Virginia, to learn about the issues associated with providing assistance to victims of crime overseas. In addition, we reviewed guidance available to assist staff, such as the Foreign Affairs Manual, post-specific operating procedures, and the duty program. We also interviewed Foreign Service officers and locally employed staff at all the posts we visited about the training they received both formally and on the job, as well as the resources at their disposal, including training and mentoring provided by Regional Consular Officers at selected posts, guidance provided by senior-level consular officers to entry-level officers at large posts, and new forums for providing information, such as a consular-supported blog focused on ACS and the Regional Consular Officer forum. We also observed Foreign Service officers and locally employed staff overseas at all the posts we visited, providing routine services such as issuing passports, as well emergency services such as visiting prisoners in jail and handling death notifications to the next of kin. In addition, in both Mexico City and Puerto Vallarta,

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Mexico, we observed post staff conducting prison visits. However, we did not address the overall quality of the ACS provided by posts.

To assess how State monitors the assistance it provides to U.S. citizens in need of emergency services, and how this information is used to inform management decisions, we reviewed the Consular Bureau's 2010 Strategic Plan and the Mission Strategic Plans for four of the five countries we visited, including the framework for measuring and evaluating the bureau's goals specific to ACS emergency services. The Bureau's Strategic Plan for fiscal year 2011 had not been released during our review's time frame. We also reviewed State's Performance Reports for fiscal years 2007 and 2008 and its Annual Performance Plan for fiscal year 2009 to ascertain how it was measuring and monitoring its ACS emergency services effort. In addition, we interviewed officials from the Bureau of Consular Affairs about the data collected through the ACS system, which is used to monitor the work of posts overseas, and discussed the problems posts identified with the ACS systems. We analyzed the annual consular package submissions from fiscal years 2003 to 2008, which provide data and narrative responses from all the 238 posts providing consular assistance overseas. Based on our review of the consular package data, we identified a number of problems with the data and provided the Bureau of Consular Affairs examples of problems we identified. Our assessment found inconsistencies in Consular Affairs data reporting by posts over time, which present major problems for monitoring and management purposes; however, we also assessed that the data give a general indication of the differences in orders of magnitude between the various ACS services provided worldwide over the time period in question. For example, the Consular Affairs data recorded roughly 4,500 deaths worldwide from natural causes during this period, compared to 25,000 arrests, compared to more than 200,000 welfare and whereabouts cases. Due to the weaknesses we noted in the data by post and over time, we report these data in very general terms simply to give a relative sense of State's activities in each of these areas. Likewise, we interviewed Foreign Service officers overseas regarding how data provided through the ACS system are used to monitor and evaluate their own activities. Additionally, we interviewed all the Regional Consular Officers—in Bangkok, Thailand; Cairo, Egypt; Frankfurt, Germany; Johannesburg, South Africa; and Washington, D.C.;<sup>1</sup>—who are responsible for providing guidance to 90 small posts

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<sup>1</sup>The only Regional Consular Officer we did not interview in person was the Supervisory Regional Consular Officer who is located in Cairo, Egypt.

around the world, and reviewed 43 Regional Consular Officer trip reports, which included findings and recommendations regarding the provision of ACS in the countries they cover. For 19 of the 43 reports, State provided only those sections of the trip reports they determined were pertinent to the provision of emergency services. Nonetheless, during post visits, two Regional Consular Officers allowed us to review the reports they had written in their entirety, and based on those reviews we determined that Regional Consular Officer reports focus mainly on management controls. In addition, at 9 of the 12 posts we visited, we obtained copies of open and closed victims' assistance reports. We determined that the data presented in this report are sufficiently reliable for the purpose for which they are presented.



# Appendix II: Comments from the Department of State



United States Department of State

*Assistant Secretary and Chief Financial Officer*

*Washington, D.C. 20520*

SEP 18 2009

Ms. Jacquelyn Williams-Bridgers  
Managing Director  
International Affairs and Trade  
Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

Dear Ms. Williams-Bridgers:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "STATE DEPARTMENT: Wide Range of Emergency Services Provided to American Citizens Overseas, but Improved Monitoring is Needed," GAO Job Code 320641.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

If you have any questions concerning this response, please contact Monica Gaw, Deputy Director, Bureau of Consular Affairs at (202) 736-9107.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "James L. Millette".

James L. Millette

cc: GAO – Anthony Moran  
CA – Janice Jacobs  
State/OIG – Mark Duda

**Department of State Comments on GAO Draft Report**

**STATE DEPARTMENT: Wide Range of Emergency Services Provided to  
American Citizens Overseas, but Improved Monitoring is Needed**  
(GAO-09-989, GAO Code 320641)

The Department thanks GAO for its efforts in evaluating the Department's emergency services to American citizens overseas. The Department appreciates GAO's recognition of the services we provide to U.S. citizens abroad who are the victims of crimes, suffer accidents, or otherwise need emergency services. The report clearly describes our preparedness to assist U.S. citizens requiring emergency services. We would also like to assure Congress that protection of U.S. citizens abroad is among the Department of State's highest priorities.

The Department appreciates the opportunity to respond to the recommendations and thanks GAO for a thorough and positive report, which has already helped us improve access to services and mechanisms to monitor provision of emergency consular services in some areas, even as GAO's engagement progressed.

**Recommendation:** To ensure the Bureau of Consular Affairs has accurate and reliable data from the mechanisms used to monitor and evaluate its provision of emergency services worldwide, and therefore make informed resource allocation decisions, we recommend that the Secretary of State direct the Bureau of Consular Affairs to:

1. Provide guidance on the information to be entered in the ACS system to ensure that data is consistently captured across posts and accurately reflects workload;
2. Improve functionality in the ACS system so that Consular Affairs management and posts can use the system more effectively.

**Response:** In general, the Department agrees with the recommendation, but also recognizes that we must trust our colleagues in the field to use good judgment to determine what constitutes a high profile or emergency case. In addition, we must have enough flexibility in our reporting mechanisms to allow for quick spot reports, followed by case entry into the ACS case-tracking database.

The Department is developing a new section in volume 7 of the Foreign Affairs Manual, which will address the broad subject of reporting and provide clear

guidelines on what information to enter into the ACS system. When published, the Department will introduce this change to posts abroad by cable and through our ACS Blog and will incorporate it into our ongoing training programs. The Department is deploying the State Messaging and Archive Retrieval Toolset (SMART), which consolidates cables and e-mail, provides search capabilities, and enables collaboration. It is a user-driven system designed to support the conduct of diplomacy by integrating commercial applications including Communicator (IM), SharePoint, Office 2007, and Google search. When fully deployed, it will provide more targeted message dissemination as well as greater access to internal information.

The Department is also refining the post management, monitoring, and oversight duties of officers in the Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) OCS and EX offices as we improve our ACS and Consular Workload and Statistical System (CWSS) systems. CWSS is starting validation testing on September 17, and will roll out near the end of October (estimated October 21).

The ACS testing and deployment schedule is an estimate only, at this point. There are many aspects involved in the introduction of this complex system, which makes it difficult to confirm a final timeline now. ACS 1.06 beta testing should be complete by the end of September. Once completed, we plan to deploy in October 2009. ACS 1.07 will begin beta testing in November 2009, pending some issues with Facial Recognition, with a planned deployment date of the end of the year, assuming the beta testing is successful.

The Department is improving and refining its approach to technology in Citizens Services work. While we are incorporating interim measures in the existing ACS system, we are also developing a new Global Citizens Services (GCS) project. The GCS project is a strategic effort that will transform and modernize the systems supporting the provision of services to U.S. citizens domestically and abroad. The new system will be a person-centric case management system that will facilitate case tracking, ease data entry requirements, and include appropriate management tools. The GCS project was launched in August 2009 and is broken into several phases, the dates and durations of which are estimates and subject to change:

- Phase 1 – 14 months (ending 10/2010) – preliminary study and scope; high level architecture and requirements; pre-acquisition;
- Phase 2 -- 6 months – (ending 4/2011) – acquisition;
- Phase 3 – 36 months – (ending 2014) – development of a complete GCS solution. Phase 3 development could be staged to provide new GCS

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components as early as 2013 or, perhaps, 2012. Exactly what and when components will be phased in cannot be estimated until most Phase 1 activities are completed.

**Recommendation:** To ensure American citizens who experience an emergency overseas can easily find and identify emergency contact information on post Web sites, we recommend that the Secretary of State:

1. Require posts' main Web sites to include emergency contact information;
2. Periodically test the accuracy of the emergency contact information provided on the posts' main Web sites.

**Response:** The Department agrees with the recommendation. CA is coordinating with our embassies and consulates abroad to make emergency contact information easily accessible for U.S. citizens abroad and in the United States on post-controlled web pages, and to periodically test the accuracy of the emergency contact information. We are also taking measures to provide links to such information on the Department of State web page <http://www.state.gov/> and the Bureau of Consular Affairs' web page <http://travel.state.gov>.

In addition, CA is in the planning stages of a major redesign of <http://travel.state.gov>. Easier and more obvious access to emergency assistance information is one of the many goals of this project. The redesign will commence in late September 2009, after the completion of a formal usability study of the site. To minimize disruption to site users, changes will be made incrementally throughout the site over the course of FY2010. Better access to emergency assistance information will be prioritized and will be implemented in the first quarter of FY2010.

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# Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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## GAO Contact

Jess Ford, (202) 512-4268, [fordj@gao.gov](mailto:fordj@gao.gov)

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## Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the individuals named above, Anthony Moran, Assistant Director; Julie Hirshen; John F. Miller; Grace Lui; Jacob Davis; Martin De Alteriis, Assistant Director; Joe Carney, Justin Fisher, and Suneeti Shah made key contributions to this report. In addition, the following staff provided technical assistance: Etana Finkler and Ellery Scott.

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