



USA SERVICES

USA Services: Helping Government Help Citizens by Answering Telephone Inquiries

Partner Agency: U.S. Department of State, Office of Overseas Citizens Services

The Situation

One of the State Department's key objectives is ensuring the welfare of American citizens when they are out of the country and alerting them to any known credible threats to their safety and security while abroad. Consular officials around the world are involved in the day-to-day protection of Americans abroad. However, the office in the United States responsible for directing Consular officials abroad and directly assisting Americans is also responsible for providing general travel information.

How USA Services Helped:

In October 2001 – just a month after the terrorist attacks of September 11 – the State Department entered into an agreement with USA Services to answer phone calls from people in the United States and other countries, primarily addressing concerns about travel to foreign countries. During those first tension-filled weeks of combat in Afghanistan, the call agents responded to inquiries around the clock. USA Services handled basic inquiries and transferred the more complex or case specific inquiries to the State Department. The partnership with USA Services allows the State Department's desk officers for each country to concentrate on more complex matters and provides a "live voice" to large numbers of Americans requesting general travel and consular information.

Given the success of the initial program, the State Department then added two other issues to the database – general questions about how the Bureau of Consular Affairs can assist parents if their children have been, or are suspected

of abduction by the other parent, as well as information on international adoption. To date, USA Services has responded to more than 100,000 calls for the State Department from the public.

State Department's assessment:

According to James Schuler of the Office of Overseas Citizen Services, Bureau of Consular Affairs, "USA Services allows us to provide better customer service. It is scalable and flexible in responding to our needs—opening with only a few hours' notice in the middle of the night during crises. The call agents are refreshingly enthusiastic and devoted to duty. We also realized an unexpected benefit from this service: the feedback from call agents. The call agents keep track of the number and types of calls they get. That way, we know what citizens are interested in and what they cannot find on our Web site. We use the feedback to improve our Web site and our database. Both the general public and our two agencies will continue to benefit greatly from the unique partnership."

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