

Harnessing Communication Technology to Minimize Passport Expedite Requests

for the U.S. Department of State

Recommendation Report

April 2024



CODE *for*
AMERICA



“ A popular Government,
without popular information,
or the means of acquiring it,
is but a Prologue to a Farce
or a Tragedy.

— *James Madison,*
Founding Father of the U.S. Constitution

Executive Summary

This report draws on primary data and extensive secondary sources to explore solutions and propose recommendations for the Department of State (DoS) to reduce **burdensome passport expedite requests**. Code for America evaluates solutions against three criteria: increases operational efficiency, increases public access to passport information, and cost-effectiveness. This report focuses solely on solutions that enhance communication and information-sharing between the DoS and individuals through human-centered civic technology (HCCT) solutions proven successful in analogous contexts. Overall, Code for America **recommends sending generalized email and text passport reminders to all citizens**, timed strategically at six months, three months, and six weeks before peak travel seasons. These messages encourage recipients to apply or renew their passport in a timely manner, reducing passport expedite requests.

ABOUT CODE FOR AMERICA

Code for America believes government can work for the people, and by the people, in the digital age, starting with the people who need it most. We build digital services that enhance government capabilities, and we help others do the same across all levels of government. We organize thousands of volunteers across more than 80 chapters nationwide who improve government in their local communities. Our goal: a 21st century government that effectively and equitably serves all Americans. Learn more at codeforamerica.org.

Introduction

Every year, many U.S. citizens find themselves scrambling to secure passports for upcoming trips. Some may have forgotten to check their passport's expiration date. Others may have left too little time to apply for their first passport. As travel deadlines approach, these citizens place expedited passport requests. The process of expediting passports is burdensome for the U.S. Department of State (DoS). An expedited passport application takes far more coordination, time, and attention to process than a regular passport application. Overburdened document processing centers sort the same documents submitted months earlier, Congressional offices receive panicked or angry calls from citizens who need support, and passport agencies struggle to keep up with demand.

Code for America is a leader in government technology consulting, and is dedicated to creating government solutions through human centered civic technologies (HCCT). Human centered civic technologies are digital systems employed by governments that deliver services tailored to the needs, skills, and habits of citizens. The purpose of this recommendation report is to outline HCCT solutions to increase proactive communication and information sharing between the DoS and citizens to reduce passports expedite requests.

This report outlines solutions based on primary interview data and valuable secondary sources. To generate a final recommendation, each solution is evaluated against the following criteria: user experience impact, internal efficiency and operational impact, cost, and ease of implementation. This report explores only HCCT solutions that improve communication and information-sharing between the Department of State and individuals, and includes only solutions that have been successful in other jurisdictions and do not require intensive federal policy changes. While this report evaluates a comprehensive set of solutions and offers a final recommendation, it does not discuss in detail how this recommendation would be practically carried out.

Based on an analysis of solutions against the criteria, Code for America recommends that the DoS send generalized email and text reminders to all citizens three times a year; six months, three months, and 6 weeks ahead of peak travel times. This recommendation is based on the models of National Weather Service text alerts and Amber Alerts.

This report will discuss research methods, results, and Code for America's final recommendations. This report concludes with references and an appendix.

Research Methods

Code for America conducted primary and secondary research methods to formulate solutions for this report, and applied solutions to a decision matrix to determine final recommendations. This combination of research methods allows a diverse range of insights, both from direct interactions with stakeholders and from existing literature and data, to inform the final recommendations presented in the report.

Formulating Solutions: Primary & Secondary Research

This report examines existing literature, reports, and studies related to the topic of improving bureaucratic inefficiencies through harnessing human-centered civic technologies (HCCT) within federal organizations. This involved gathering information from industry publications, news reports, and reputable non-government organizations. Code for America reviewed documents that discuss similar challenges faced by other organizations, best practices in communication strategies, and advancements in HCCT that can be leveraged to address the identified issues. These secondary research sources are detailed in the References section (page 24).

This report also utilizes primary research gathered from an interview with a Congressional employee to gain insight into passport issues and areas for improvement. A Code for America associate interviewed the Congressional employee working as a constituent services representative, who has extensive experience with citizen passport issues and expedition requests. The employee works in a busy city district, and has diverse and intimate insight into trends and common problem areas. The interview questions are located in Appendix 1 (page 20). Additionally, this report pulls from a two minute focus group interview with 14 college students aged 20-22.

Evaluating Solutions: Criteria & Decision Matrix

Each proposed solution is systematically evaluated against criteria in a decision matrix to determine final recommendations. Criteria are weighted on a scale of 3 to 1, with 3 being the most crucial consideration and 1 being the least crucial consideration. Solutions are rated on a scale of 1-10 to assess the degree to which they satisfy each criterion. The outcome of each decision matrix is discussed in the Results section (page 7). Decision matrix tables are located in Appendix 2 (page 21).

This report uses the modified guiding principles of the Department of State's Open Data Policy to create criteria. This policy is a component of the [U.S. Digital Government Strategy](#), and is an appropriate model for this report as it serves as a guideline for the DoS and promotes HCCT. The goal of this policy is to "make information resources accessible, discoverable, and usable by the public," which is highly aligned to the purpose of this report. The modified criteria and the justifications for their weighting are listed below in Figure 1.

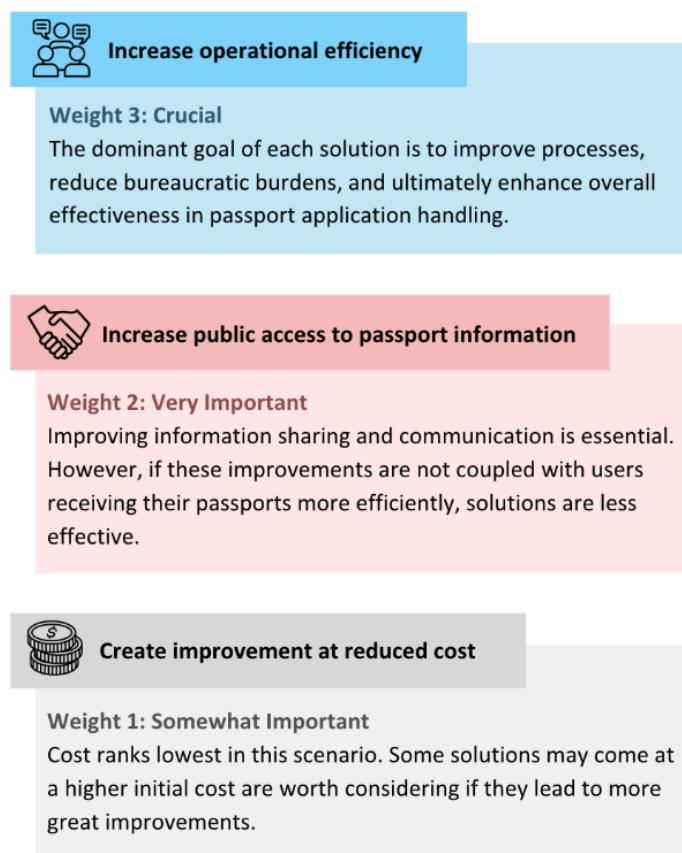


Figure 1: Solution criteria and weight rationale.

Results

Code for America has identified four human-centered civic technology solutions to mitigate passport expedite requests:

- 1) Citizen-specific passport renewal and application reminders
- 2) Generalized renewal and application reminders
- 3) Social media outreach
- 4) Local network broadcasting

Solution 1: Citizen-Specific Passport Renewal and Application Reminders

◆ Solution description

Currently, the Department of State offers citizens the ability to [opt into email updates](#) to track the status of a passport application or renewal. While this system is valuable for those who have already applied for a passport and are seeking updated information, these emails are not proactive and do not meaningfully rectify the issues that lead to expedite requests. They do not reach citizens who have failed to renew their passports in a timely manner or address those who encounter issues during the application process.

To improve the email update system, The Department of State can implement a voluntary text and email reminder system to reduce last-minute passport expedite requests. When renewing or applying for a passport, citizens can choose to receive future passport renewal reminders. This solution does not apply to citizens who do not hold a passport or have completed the application process. Passport holders can receive multiple messages at an interval of one year, six months, and six weeks (last minute) before expiration. Communications should be tailored based on their proximity to a citizen's passport expiration. For example, a text message six weeks before expiration could explain that any upcoming travel arrangements will be disrupted without action.

These reminders should include clear instructions on how to renew their passports and emphasize the importance of doing so six months before travel to avoid expedite requests. As these messages are voluntary, it is unlikely they will be perceived as invasive. The DoS should use professional language in the reminder messages to ensure recipients perceive the messages as legitimate government communications rather than spam. Following the implementation of tailored text reminders, the DoS should continuously monitor the response rates to gauge the effectiveness of messages. The DoS should analyze data on renewal rates before and after the implementation of the reminder system to assess its impact and make adjustments as needed.

◆ Models: GetCalFresh & LA'MESSAGE

GetCalFresh and LA'MESSAGE are examples of successful government communication programs that employ text message reminders. GetCalFresh uses text reminders to help California citizens renew applications for food assistance. LA'MESSAGE uses text reminders to remind Louisiana citizens to reapply for a variety of safety net programs such as Medicaid. Both of these programs showed great reduction in “churn.” Churn occurs when a citizen’s benefits are revoked, but they rejoin the program soon after. Churn often occurs when clients simply do not know what they must do to maintain benefits, or when they struggle to complete mandated procedural tasks. Churn is burdensome on caseworkers, document processing centers, and call centers.

GetCalFresh [employs direct communication](#) with citizens to reduce the incidence of citizens missing food benefit renewal application deadlines. It leverages instant messaging via SMS and email to send clients up to three reminders to submit their renewal form. These invitations include a link to quickly and easily submit the renewal form online. Text messages were found to be more successful than emails in increasing renewals. GetCalFresh also employs last-minute reminders sent right before the renewal deadlines, which led to a nearly eight-fold increase in submission rates among citizens who had not yet submitted their form. 60% of clients invited to submit their renewal via the message reminders do so. GetCalFresh has assisted over a million people in receiving food benefits.

LA'MESSAGE [also employs text message reminders](#) prompting citizens to submit renewal applications for a diverse array of benefit programs. The goal of LA'MESSAGE is to help citizens while reducing burden for caseworkers. By the close of the pilot in December 2019, successful renewals and case satisfaction improved by 10-20% across safety net programs services. For example, over one year, 52% of supplemental nutrition (WIC) clients successfully renewed over a baseline of 29%. This pilot program demonstrated that citizens responded to professional language more than friendly language in text reminders. Follow-up qualitative research indicates the effect may be related to trust that the sender of the message is the program agency, rather than a fraudulent message.

◆ Evaluation

This solution scores a 41 out of 50 based on criteria, indicating this solution is **effective**. The decision matrix for Solution 1 is located in Appendix 2 (page 21)..

Operational efficiency: Personalized text messages [are more effective](#) at promoting action than non-personalized messages. This model will significantly reduce the bureaucratic issues resulting from citizens missing passport renewal deadlines. Tailored messages allow for passport-holders who are most likely to request an expedited passport behave proactively to ensure they receive their documents in an appropriate manner. Repetitive reminders limit the likelihood that citizens will ignore the messages. According to a Congressional employee interviewed by Code for America, citizens who fail to renew their passport due to poor planning make up a large number of frantic callers and expedite requests. However, this solution will not reduce expedite requests from citizens who are applying for their first passport, which reduces the scope and efficacy of this solution.

Public access to passport information: Tailored messages allow citizens with a passport appropriate, potent information regarding their need to renew. Updates allow passport holders to receive up-to-date reminders. However, those who have not applied for a passport or have not opted in for reminders at their last renewal appointment will not receive any additional information.

Cost: While there are no public records of the costs for this model. However, Code for America believes it will be an expensive process to parse citizen data and send personalized reminders tailored to every passport holder. This system will require continued upkeep, as passports must be renewed throughout citizen lifetimes.

Solution 2: Generalized Renewal and Application Reminders

◆ *Solution Description*

The DoS can utilize citizen records to send out generalized mail and text reminders encouraging all eligible citizens to apply for passports or renew ahead of time. These communications, sent out six months, three months, and six weeks before peak travel times can increase timely passport renewal applications. As discussed above, these messages should employ professional language and detailed instructions on how to proceed for the general audience. Additionally, they must be framed in a way that allows the public to understand that they are being sent for their benefit: applying or renewing in a timely manner will allow citizens to enjoy their travel plans with fewer disruptions or stresses. Recipients should also be able to opt out of automatic messages through their phone's settings if they do not find them applicable. This solution allows all citizens to receive messages, not only passport holders or applicants.

One pitfall of generalized message updates is they are more likely to be perceived as unwanted, invasive, or annoying by the public. In order to rectify these pitfalls, the DoS will need to garner trust with its national user community. Kenda Sutton-EL, founding executive director of national nonprofit Birth in Color, is an advocate of generalized government text messages. Sutton states that in order for these messages to succeed, the programs should first be [piloted with community organizations](#) who already have the public's trust first. This way, select users can experience the messages, provide feedback, and allow the DoS to adjust the system if necessary so that they can vouch for it. This allows the DoS to tap into the trust and knowledge base those organizations have cultivated over the years and funnel resources back to those organizations, enabling them to do more in the communities they serve.

◆ *Models: National Weather Service updates and Amber Alerts*

Automatic weather alerts from the National Weather Service (NWS) and Amber Alerts serve as prime examples of automated, generalized government text messages. These alerts are designed to provide timely and critical information about severe events directly to communities.

NWS automatic weather alerts are dispatched rapidly to the general public when severe weather threats are identified. These alerts are disseminated across a broad spectrum of communication channels including text messages, ensuring that the alerts reach a wide audience, maximizing their effectiveness in informing and alerting the public. NWS automated alerts are based on real-time data and advanced forecasting techniques, which enhances confidence in the information provided and encourages individuals to take appropriate actions in response to the alerts. By promptly notifying the public in a way that is framed to protect their interests, NWS alerts exemplify the effectiveness and importance of automated government messages in delivering timely, accurate, and personalized information to the public to avoid complexity. NWS alerts are widely accepted and appreciated by citizens.

In addition, Amber Alerts disseminate information to maximize the ability for the public to locate a missing child and alert authorities. These alerts are often geotargeted to specific geographic regions relevant to the search for the missing child to mobilize local communities and law enforcement agencies in the search efforts. Numerous success stories attest to the effectiveness of Amber Alerts in facilitating the safe recovery of missing children. The prompt dissemination of relevant information to the public has led to the successful resolution of many abduction cases, highlighting the vital role of automated government messages in safeguarding vulnerable individuals. Similarly, Amber Alerts alerts are viewed as necessary and useful to citizens.

◆ *Evaluation*

This solution scores a 49 out of 50 based on criteria, indicating this solution is **highly effective**. The decision matrix for Solution 2 is located in Appendix 2 (page 21).

Operational efficiency: This model has extensive reach to encourage all citizens to apply or renew their passports, greatly reducing expedite requests. As over 95% of Americans have access to email and over 90% have smartphones, there are few solutions that can better reach individuals and encourage them to take action.

Public access to passport information: This solution allows for all individuals in the DoS record system to receive information, rather than only those who have filed for a renewal and opted for future messages. In this capacity, this solution can reach a great number of citizens and further reduce expedite requests. However, this information is not tailored to specific individuals, so is less applicable to each person. Citizens who have already applied for a passport or renewal, or have up-to-date documents, will not find these messages useful.

Cost: There is no specific public data on the cost of generalized government message alerts. Code for America believes this solution is costly, but less costly than individualized messages. While sending out more generalized messages to *all citizens* comes at a higher cost than sending personalized messages only to *citizens that have passports*, there is no need to build expensive tech systems that allow for the communication of individualized information in this solution.

Solution 3: Social Media Outreach

◆ Solution Description

Rather than using an official government website or receiving government communications, citizens are increasingly utilizing social media as a means of retrieving information and news related to government matters. Utilizing social media provides the DoS new channels to reach and inform audiences that may have little knowledge about the passport process. Delivering crucial information to citizens, particularly during crucial travel timepoints, can ultimately reduce passport expedition requests.

The DoS can create a targeted social media campaign to encourage passport renewal or application in order to reduce the need for expedited passport requests. Social media is a unique venue for approaching this issue in that online materials can be specifically catered to have a greater impact on certain demographics. The DoS should identify which age groups or geographic locations are most likely to require passport renewals or applications and create targeted posts. These posts must be engaging, informative, and feature a call to action. Social media campaigns should communicate the potential risks associated with last-minute passport applications and expedite requests, such as increased fees and processing delays.



12:14 PM · Mar 02, 2024 · Twitter for iPhone

74

58

178

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Figure 2: Example of DoS social media post that encourages young people to proactively secure their passports.

A mock-up of an official Department of State social media post is depicted in Figure 2. This mock-up represents a post on Twitter catered to young people considering vacationing. This mock-up received a 100% approval rating from a focus group of 14 college students aged 21-22.

◆ *Models: The Center for Disease Control and Department of Defense*

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) and Department of Defense (DoD) offer examples of effective use of social media by government agencies. These bodies have successfully utilized social media to address common issues facing their operations.

Following COVID-19 pandemic, millions of people turned to the Internet for health information and advice. The [CDC has used social media effectively](#) to discuss topics related to the pandemic and combat untrustworthy sources spreading misinformation. The CDC has a large following on Facebook and Instagram, but its use of Twitter is an exceptional example of the agency using social networks to reach citizens with accurate health information. The CDC posts regular, accessible updates that can be easily shared and referenced.

The DoD is America's largest government agency whose stated aim is to provide the military forces needed to deter war and ensure our nation's security. However, citizens are often unfamiliar with the daily tasks of DoD employees and can be skeptical of the agency's projects and aims. Using the hashtag #KnowYourMil on Twitter, the [DoD agency showcases](#) some of the more exciting, unusual, and unexpected projects it's involved in across the world, such as supporting scientific research in the Antarctic. These posts increase citizens' engagement with the DoD's operations and bolster public trust.

◆ *Evaluation*

This solution scores a 35 out of 50 based on criteria, indicating this solution is **moderately effective**. The decision matrix for Solution 3 is located in Appendix 2 (page 22).

Operational efficiency: This model will only reach users who utilize social media, limiting the number of people who may decide to act on renewing or applying for a passport. According to a Congressional employee, this solution will be very effective among young social media users, but the majority of callers are middle-aged. In this capacity, this solution has less reach to reduce expedite requests.

Public access to passport information: As this solution only reaches citizens using social media, public access to passport information is more limited. For citizens who do use social media, only users who follow the Department of State or follow other users who interact with the Department of State will see passport information content. Additionally, this information will not be relevant for listeners that do not need to reapply or apply for a passport.

Cost: There are no additional costs to social media. The only expense associated with this solution is compensating a social media marketing team.

Solution 4: Local Network Broadcasting

◆ *Solution Description*

The US Department of State can leverage local networking broadcasting, which includes long-form video content on platforms like YouTube, streaming services, and network TV, to encourage citizens to apply for a passport and reduce passport expedite requests. A local network broadcasting solution is distinct from a social media campaign as it requires more planning, is not free, and is hosted on shared video-sharing platforms rather than social networks. Additionally, these videos will only be advertised to certain locations and demographic in the interest of cost and feasibility. However, local-network broadcasts can be cross posted to other accessible websites for increased reach. For example, a local network TV ad can be cross-posted to YouTube or Twitter for a general audience without additional promotion.

The DoS can produce engaging long-form videos that highlight the importance of renewing or applying for a passport in a timely manner. These videos can offer step-by-step instructions, highlight necessary documentation, and clarify common misconceptions about passport renewal or application requirements. By presenting this information in an accessible format, the Department can encourage longer viewing times. By broadcasting these PSAs to a broad audience, the Department can raise awareness about the risks and consequences of delayed passport applications, ultimately motivating more citizens to take timely action. Through informative, engaging, and strategically targeted messaging, the DoS can empower individuals to take proactive steps towards securing their passports and facilitating seamless international travel experiences.

◆ *Models: Melbourne Metro Trains and U.S. Election Assistance Commission*

Metro Trains Melbourne is a government-owned train service serving the city of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. In November 2012, Metro Trains released the public campaign *Dumb Ways to Die*. *Dumb Ways to Die* is a catchy humorous song promoting railway safety. It appeared in newspapers, local radio and outdoor advertising throughout the Metro Trains network and eventually went viral on YouTube, today sitting at over [300 million views](#). According to Metro Trains, the campaign contributed to a [20 per cent reduction](#) in "near-miss" accidents compared to the annual average. The campaign's effective use of local broadcasting and video content, coupled with its widespread dissemination across multiple platforms effectively captured the public's attention and helped address train safety concerns.

Similarly, the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) strategically employs local network broadcasting, including YouTube ads and collaborations with local stations, to enhance voter education and engagement during election seasons. By airing informative broadcasts about the voter registration process, upcoming deadlines, polling locations, and resources for voters with disabilities, the EAC ensures that essential voting information reaches diverse communities across the country. This approach is particularly impactful in areas with diverse populations or high numbers of first-time voters, where access to accurate and accessible voting information is crucial. Through their efforts in leveraging local network broadcasting, the EAC effectively addresses operational challenges related to voter education and participation, ultimately promoting a more inclusive and informed democratic process.

◆ *Evaluation*

This solution scores a 40 out of 50 based on criteria, indicating this solution is **effective**. The decision matrix for Solution 4 is located in Appendix 2 (page 22).

Operational efficiency: This solution will be effective for the citizens that it reaches. Engaging long-form broadcasting is memorable, and cannot be skipped when consuming local broadcasting networks. Additionally, tailored broadcasting is highly impactful, and will increase the likelihood that viewers will take action regarding their passports.

Public access to passport information: Tailored, engaging broadcasting is very effective at getting listeners to consider changing their behavior. However, not all citizens will be watching local broadcasting networks when this solution is implemented, which reduces its impact on expedite requests. Additionally, this information will not be relevant for listeners that do not need to reapply or apply for a passport.

Cost: It is relatively costly to run broadcasts on platforms such as streaming sites, local television networks, and radio stations. Depending on the platform and size of the demographic, it can cost thousands to hundreds of thousands to run a 30-second ad.

Recommendations

Based on the research examined above, Code for America recommends the Department of State (DoS) implement a generalized reminder messaging system to reduce passport expedite requests. This recommendation is supported by an evaluation of this solution based on criteria in a decision matrix (located in Appendix 2, page 23). The DoS should employ the following strategies to ensure the success of human-centered civic technology system:

Utilize Citizen Records for Communication: Leverage citizen records to send out non-personalized mail and text reminders encouraging eligible citizens to apply for or renew passports ahead of peak travel times. Send messages three times a year centered around the peak travel month of June. Message 1 is sent in October (6 months ahead of peak travel time), Message 2 is sent in January (3 months ahead of peak travel time), and Message 3 is sent in April (6 weeks ahead of peak travel time).

Employ Professional Language and Detailed Instructions: Craft messages with professional language and provide clear, detailed instructions on the passport application or renewal process. Emphasize the benefits of timely renewal, such as avoiding disruptions or stresses during travel. By framing the messages in a way that highlights the benefits to the recipient, they are more likely to be perceived as helpful rather than intrusive.

Offer Opt-Out Options: Provide recipients with the ability to opt out of automatic messages through their phone settings if they do not find them applicable. Respecting individuals' preferences for communication ensures that the messages are well-received and perceived as respectful of their privacy.

Build Trust with the National User Community: Prioritize building trust with the national user community by piloting the messaging program with community organizations that already have the public's trust. Collaborate with community organizations to pilot the messaging system, gather feedback, and make adjustments as needed. Channel resources back to community organizations that participate in piloting the messaging program, enabling them to do more in the communities they serve.

By implementing these recommendations, the Department of State can reduce passport expedite requests while fostering trust and collaboration with the national user community.

Appendix 1

Interview Questions

Can you describe some common issues or complaints you have heard from constituents regarding the passport application process?

What specific challenges have you seen constituents face when trying to navigate the passport application process?

Are there any recurring patterns or trends on when constituents encounter issues with the passport application process?

Based on your experience expediting passports, what are things you would like to see change in the process?

Appendix 2

Decision Matrix - Solution 1

Criteria and Weight		Options							
		Solution 1		Solution 2		Solution 3		Solution 4	
Criterion	Weight	Rating	Score	Rating	Score	Rating	Score	Rating	Score
Increases operational efficiency	3	8	24	10	30	5	15	7	21
Increases public access to passport information	2	8	16	8	16	5	10	7	14
Low Cost	1	1	1	3	3	10	10	5	5
Total score			41		49		35		40

Decision Matrix - Solution 2

Criteria and Weight		Options							
		Solution 1		Solution 2		Solution 3		Solution 4	
Criterion	Weight	Rating	Score	Rating	Score	Rating	Score	Rating	Score
Increases operational efficiency	3			10	30				
Increases public access to passport information	2			8	16				
Low Cost	1			3	3				
Total score					49				

Decision Matrix - Solution 3

Criteria and Weight		Options							
		Solution 1		Solution 2		Solution 3		Solution 4	
Criterion	Weight	Rating	Score	Rating	Score	Rating	Score	Rating	Score
Increases operational efficiency	3					5	15		
Increases public access to passport information	2					5	10		
Low Cost	1					10	10		
Total score							35		

Decision Matrix - Solution 4

Criteria and Weight		Options							
		Solution 1		Solution 2		Solution 3		Solution 4	
Criterion	Weight	Rating	Score	Rating	Score	Rating	Score	Rating	Score
Increases operational efficiency	3							7	21
Increases public access to passport information	2							7	14
Low Cost	1							5	5
Total score									40

Final Decision Matrix

Criteria and Weight		Options							
		Solution 1		Solution 2		Solution 3		Solution 4	
Criterion	Weight	Rating	Score	Rating	Score	Rating	Score	Rating	Score
Increases operational efficiency	3	9	27	10	30	5	15	7	21
Increases public access to passport information	2	9	18	8	16	5	10	7	14
Low Cost	1	1	1	3	3	10	10	5	5
Total score			46		49		35		40

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