

G A O
Accountability · Integrity · Reliability

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.

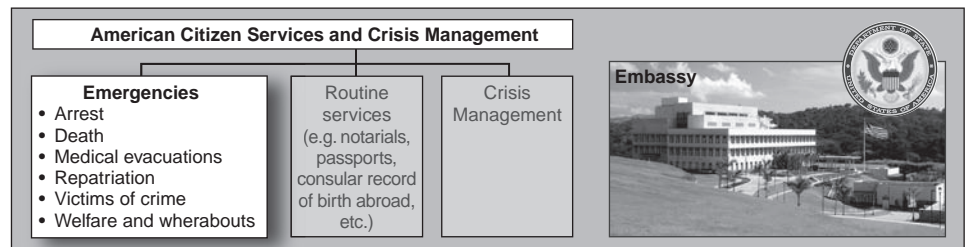
STATE DEPARTMENT

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.