

The U.S. Embassy Announces a New Visa Processing System

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The United States Embassy in India announced on September 5, 2012 that it is implementing a new visa processing system throughout India that will further standardize procedures and simplify fee payment and appointment scheduling through a new website at www.ustraveldocs.com/in. Minister Counselor for Consular Affairs, Julia Stanley, announced at a press conference that the United States is committed to providing all visa applicants with an efficient, transparent, and standardized application process and that Worldwide, the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs is instituting significant changes to the visa application process under the Global Support Strategy program. Beginning September 26, 2012, U.S. visa applicants will be able to pay application fees via Electronic Fund Transfer (EFT) or with their mobile phones. They can also pay in cash at more than 1,800 Axis and Citibank branches. Within one hour of payment, applicants will receive an SMS message, letting them know that their receipt has been activated and that they can proceed with scheduling their appointments. Appointments can be scheduled through the new website or by calling the call center.

For the first time, applicants will be able to schedule their appointments online or by phone. The new global appointment scheduling system will also allow companies and travel agents to purchase multiple fee receipts for group travel, and it accommodates the scheduling of group and expedited appointments. Through the website, visa applicants will be able to fill out application forms, find out what documents are required, pay visa application fees, schedule an appointment for biometrics collection, and schedule an interview at a U.S. Embassy or Consulate.

Under the new system, passports, visas, immigrant visa packets, and other documents will be delivered to 33 document pick-up locations across India within a week at no charge. Applicants will be asked to choose a delivery location when they schedule their appointments. Using the website, they can track the progress of their visa application. When their documents are ready for pick-up, they will be notified via e-mail and/or SMS.

Visa applicants will be able to have their questions answered via telephone, e-mail, or online chat. Call center agents in Noida and Hyderabad will answer questions in Hindi, English, Punjabi, Gujarati, Tamil, and Telugu. There are no fees for calling the call center. Call centers will be open 8:00 am to 8:00 pm Monday through Friday, and 9:00 am to 6:00 pm on Sunday. The numbers are (91-120) 660-2222 or (91-22) 6720-9400 in India or 1-310-616-5424 in the United States. Applicants can e-mail in English or Hindi at supportindia@ustraveldocs.com, or they can chat directly from the website (www.ustraveldocs.com/in) during call center hours.

One important change is that under the new system, first-time applicants will have to schedule two appointments on two separate days, one for fingerprint collection and one for a consular interview. Prior to their visa interviews, applicants will have to visit an Offsite Facilitation Center (OFC) to submit their fingerprints and a photo.



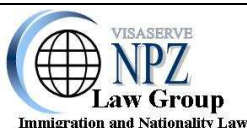
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Located apart from the Embassy and Consulates in Delhi, Chennai, Hyderabad, Kolkata, and Mumbai, the OFCs will reduce congestion at U.S. consular facilities and speed applicant processing. Most applicants will only need to submit their fingerprints at an OFC only once. In March, the U.S. Mission in India introduced the Interview Waiver Program (IWP) that allows applicants who meet certain criteria to be considered for waivers of personal interviews. Under the IWP and the new processing system, an increasing number of applicants will be able to complete all visa requirements without having to visit a U.S. Embassy or Consulate at all.

The U.S. Department of State continually strives to improve consular services to meet increased visa demand in India. In 2011, consular officers in India processed nearly 700,000 nonimmigrant visa applications, an increase of more than 11 percent over the previous year. Presently, applicants wait fewer than ten days for visa interview appointments and spend less than one hour at U.S. consular facilities in India.

For information about the visa application process, please visit <http://www.ustraveldocs.com/>. To receive regular updates, follow the U.S. Embassy on Facebook at www.facebook.com/India.usembassy.

This is indeed very good news and we believe that the visa applicants, under the new policy, will be able to get better and speedy service in obtaining appointments for interview, submission of papers, making visa payments online, delivery of passports, and other documents to the applicants without additional fees, etc. Initially, there may be teething problems, since the consular staff, OFC, designated banks, and the call centers are in the process of getting ready to provide services under the new policy. However, we hope everything will happen smoothly. We will be getting additional information about the processing of visas under the new policy and will keep our readers informed from time to time.



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