

# Portuguese-American Leadership Council of the United States

29 Years of Service to the Portuguese-American Community



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Secretária de Estado das Comunidades Portuguesas  
Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros  
Palácio das Necessidades, Largo do Rilvas – 1399-030 Lisboa

September 4 , 2020

Dear Madame Secretary:

We hope this letter finds you well.

Thank you again for your time to speak with us a few weeks ago, and for your interest in getting to know PALCUS and what we do. It was a pleasure speaking with you, and we appreciate the continued relationship with the Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros.

As you know, the primary mission of PALCUS is to advocate for Portuguese Americans and address the issues that affect our community. One of those issues that has been ongoing for decades is the lack of consular services support across all consulates throughout the country. On a weekly basis, we receive inquiries and complaints from our members and the community about their struggles in getting what they need from their local consulate, asking if there is anything that PALCUS can do to help them.

Consular service issues from the West coast to the East coast are generating a very high level of frustration among the Portuguese community when dealing with most offices. These issues unfortunately, have only gotten worse with the COVID 19 pandemic.

As the national organization representing the interests of all Portuguese living in the United States, it is our duty and obligation to address this issue proactively. This letter intends to draw your attention to this issue, not to criticize the Consul Generals or Honorary Consuls, but to highlight the most pressing issues and present some suggested solutions. Many of the Consul Generals and Honorary Consuls are doing their best, but they lack the support and resources to properly serve our community.

The Portuguese community deserves better, and Portugal must do better. Working together, we believe we can help find realistic solutions to make the process better for all. Below is a list of many of the current issues along with suggested solutions.

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As you will see, the issues are MANY and solving each one will take time and investment. Perhaps it would be a good idea to identify one or two Consulates to trial many of the solutions (one from each coast), and if they work well, then they can be rolled out to the rest of the Consular network.

We welcome an opportunity to discuss these issues with you directly and come up with a plan of action that we can communicate to the community. Knowing that Portugal is paying attention and willing to invest in real solutions will be well received by the community – the same community that Portugal is asking to return “home” and buy homes, invest in businesses and attend university. The Portuguese community should be respected, valued and appreciated. We are investors in the Portuguese economy, champions of the Portuguese culture and want to feel welcomed when we need service from our consulates, not to be treated poorly and with immense disrespect.

Please let me know when we can have a discussion. We look forward to working together on this very important issue.

Sincerely in the spirit of collaboration,

Angela Costa Simoes  
Chair  
Board of Directors

CC: Domingos Fezas Vital, Ambassador of Portugal to the United States

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## Communication, Access and Connecting with a Consular Representative

### **Problem:**

- Phone calls are never answered live
- Voice mail messages are left, but no one ever returns the message

### **Solution:**

- Even if an automated phone system is in place, all messages should be replied within a 48-hour timetable. Designate one person in the office to return phone messages.
- Consider hiring a phone answering service to take messages and make return phone calls. Perhaps a call center could be set up in Portugal for this.

### **Problem:**

- E-mail responses are not done in a timely manner; most do not get a response for 4-5 days-and some never get responses.

### **Solution:**

- All e-mails (non-emergency) should be answered within 72 hours. A standard professional form should be adapted. Designate one person in the office to answer emails.
- All emergency emails should be answered within 24 hours

### **Problem:**

- Websites are very confusing and set up in ways that make it hard to navigate.

### **Solution:**

- Set up a standard website platform for all Consulates that is user friendly.

## Services and Process Times, Inefficiencies

### **Problem:**

- In some areas, there is a 9 month wait to get an appointment to process renewal of citizen cards and passports.
- As this is a straightforward process, there is no reason why a citizen cannot get an appointment for a citizen card or passport within 4-6 weeks.

### **Solution:**

- Increase the number of qualified personnel across all consulates. To do this, the salaries paid need to match the cost of living of the cities in which the consulates are located.

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- Allow for renewal of citizen cards and passports to be done online or via mail.
- Give the Honorary Consuls funding and competencies to set up offices and services to process simple requests such as citizen card and passport renewals.

## **Problem:**

- There is a lack of information on how to get Portuguese citizenship for different scenarios:
  - for those whose parents or grandparents are Portuguese
  - for those who are applying through marriage
  - for those who want to attend college in Portugal
  - for those who want to work in Portugal

## **Solution:**

- Have a consulate employee dedicated to processing new Portuguese citizenship applications.
- Establish relationships with community consultants in all areas to have qualified people who can help those interested in acquiring the Portuguese citizenship. These consultants can help people understand the process and get their paperwork in order so that processing the paperwork will go as smoothly as possible.
- Conduct webinars on the subject with specific examples and how-to directions.

## **Problem:**

- It is a long, expensive process to get a Power of Attorney through the Consulate.
- In the past and prior to 2019, local notaries could prepare a power of attorney in Portuguese and have the principal sign it in their presence. Since those notaries were registered with the consulate, they would then take the Power of Attorney to the consulate and have it certified making it valid in Portugal. Now, an appointment is required to have a Power of Attorney (POA) prepared by the consulate. A sample form with the proper language is also required for the intended purpose. Once both are obtained, they will have it typed and executed in their presence and also certified. I understand that it takes some time to get an appointment for this purpose. And if not an appointment, you have to wait in line for a while. The only way around this is to have the POA prepared in Portuguese and then have it translated into English so the State of NJ can affix an apostille to the document. They will not affix an apostille to a document which is not in English. The preparation

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of the POA could range from \$250 to \$750. The translation could cost another \$200 to \$1000 depending on the length of the document. If an apostille is needed the same day, the cost is \$1500. Or \$250, but w/a wait of 4-6 weeks and 2 hours away in Trenton, NJ. According to a consulate employee, this is simply a way to “make some money” since “the notaries/agencies were simply making too much with these documents.”

## **Solution:**

- Reinstating the ability to have local notaries prepare and translate Power of Attorney documents.
- For those Consulates that still do allow local notaries to process a Power of Attorney, a complete list of all the notaries registered with the consulate should be provided to people who call inquiring about the service, not just the same name every time.

## **Problem:**

- No ability to pay with a credit card or debit card. Only cash or check

## **Solution:**

- Implement the ability to pay via credit card or debit card. This would also allow people to pay for services online and expedite services.

## **Community Engagement**

### **Problem:**

- In some areas, the Consul Generals and Honorary Consuls have no contact with community organizations or the local community.
- Little to no information is shared with organizations to help share the information with their members, and therefore ensuring as many people as possible are aware of different programs, updates and other important information. The situation has worsened with COVID-19.

### **Solution:**

- Consulates should maintain regular contact with the community through the Portuguese language press, social media, publishing a simple newsletter and weekly updates through Zoom or webinars, especially information about COVID-19 in Portugal, travel updates, etc.
- As this all requires more personnel, offer internships to local Portuguese American students (college or high school). These internships can even be virtual, where students do not have to go to the Consulate.
- Honorary Consuls should be available to visit different Portuguese clubs and get to know the community. Getting to know the community, its leaders, attending festas where Portuguese food, culture and costumes are kept alive

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is extremely important and will help the Honorary consul seem more approachable.

## **Problem:**

- There is a general lack of understanding of the immigrant community and the dynamics of the community.

## **Solution:**

- Consulate employees should be recruited from within the local communities. There is plenty of local talent, including establishing paid internships with Portuguese American students at universities, especially those with professional aspirations in government or foreign service.

## **Problem:**

- Lack of friendliness and professionalism, customer service issues when dealing with personnel at the consulate.
- Please see Appendix A at the end of this letter to read some truly horrible examples of how people have been treated at local consulates across the country.

## **Solution:**

- Implementation of a post-service survey sent from your office via email or regular mail requesting feedback from all who received consular services. This will provide the important data needed to determine if consular services are improving and implement training and reforms to the current system.
- A series of training webinars should become a requirement for all consulate employees to cover the following topics:
  - Community relations and customer service, and the expectation of a warm, welcoming, helpful and professional high level of customer service to be set by the Portuguese Government.
  - The importance of the immigrant population to the economy of Portugal, the continuation of the Portuguese language and culture around the globe, the impact on political relations with the US government, etc.



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## Consular Areas and Access

### **Problem:**

- There is very sporadic and inconsistent service to communities outside main cities where Consulates are located, specifically in San Francisco and Florida.

### **Solution:**

- Permanências Consulares need to be consistent and occur monthly to all areas of the consular jurisdiction.
- For example, of the 350,000 Portuguese-Americans in California around 80% live outside of the San Francisco Bay Area, and that doesn't include the 10 additional states that is served by the Consulate in San Francisco. South Florida has more than 60% of the Portuguese that need Consulate Services; however the Honorary Consulate in Palm Coast, that just serves the city of Orlando, has Consulate services 3 weeks per month while the Miami Honorary Consulate has service one week per month.

### **Problem:**

- The Honorary Consuls are not given enough responsibility and resources to fulfill the needs of the local communities. Without the ability to do anything meaningful with regard to consular services, the Honorary Consuls end up being just social figureheads in the community, not serving any real purpose.
- Most Honorary Consuls are in areas with large Portuguese-American communities and not having the structures to serve the community is an embarrassment for them, Portugal, the community and the cities where they live.
- It doesn't make sense for someone to take a day off of work in order to drive multiple hours to the Consulate for a 30-minute appointment. This is something that should be easily taken care of by Honorary Consuls.

### **Solution:**

- The honorary consuls should be trained and given more responsibilities such as:
  - Recognize forms, ID cards and Passports
  - Have communication avenues with the community (website, Portuguese newspaper, Social media) so they can be in touch with the community and be able to make important announcements regarding traveling, lodging, COVID information, and anything else that is pertinent to their local community.

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## APPENDIX A

### California

- August 1<sup>st</sup> 2020- two callers on the same day. An example of many others we received.
- At 10AM, a lady called. Stating that she submitted a citizen application 33 months ago and hasn't heard a thing. She e-mailed the consulate in San Francisco multiple times (according to her) in the last 2 years and no response.
- at 3:30PM--another lady called and stated that: her husband passed away 8 months ago. She sent all the documents (death certificate, etc.) to San Francisco, as they requested in February. Still hasn't received any document back. All she needs is her husband's death certificate from her local county (that she sent in) stamped and signed by a consulate official. Since no word from the consulate from San Francisco in 5 months, she hasn't received her part of the retirement from Portugal. And, she is on limited income.

### New Jersey

- A woman went to the Newark consulate without an appointment because her husband passed over the weekend. She wanted to take him to his final resting place in Portugal. They yelled at the woman because she did not have an appointment and then told her she had to wait in the hopes that someone with a scheduled appointment would not show. The woman assured me that she sat there and for at least 2 hours and saw nobody come through the door. Employees would walk by the counter and simply ignore her. Finally after waiting almost 3 hours she had the courage to make her way to the counter to see if someone would help her when the same person who yelled at her for not having an appointment told her off for just sitting there.
- A Portuguese citizen was being deported for something he did as a young adult. His passport was expired. ICE said they contacted the Portuguese Consulate to obtain a passport or some sort of travel document to proceed with the removal to Portugal. This gentleman sat in jail for 3 weeks waiting for someone from the consulate to see him and get him the travel document. And this only happened because both his attorney's office and his family were contacting the consulate almost on a daily basis.



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## Rhode Island

- A dual citizen who became permanently disabled and eligible for disability benefits in the US and Portugal (he emigrated to the US after working for a number of years in Portugal). He went to the consulate FOUR times for the consulate to certify with his physician that he was in fact disabled. They continued to give him incorrect information and when he finally had enough, the woman had the audacity to tell him that he could "wait because he wasn't going to die anytime soon."
- A dual citizen provided the consulate with documents to resolve an issue in Portugal. He paid, never heard from them for over a year, and finally went back in person. They denied they had any of the paperwork, he got upset, and they threatened to call the police. He challenged them to call the police and said that when the police arrived, he would let the police know that they took his money, didn't do the work and misplaced his paperwork. After a back and forth, they gave him his money back.
- A number of people have complained about waiting for 1 to 2 hours (depending on the day) to renew a passport or cartão de cidadão or try to obtain a procuração, only to be told when it was their turn that the machine wasn't working or that the consulate no longer does procurações
- A gentleman made an appointment for 9am to resolve a matter. He works construction and took a half day out of work. When he got there, he was told that he couldn't be taken care of until noon and if he didn't like it, he could leave.
- Someone who lived in Rhode Island for a number of years moved back to Portugal. Portugal was trying to tax him as if he had been living in Portugal the entire time. He was registered at the vice-consulate in Providence while living here and was requesting that they provide a letter certifying he was in fact registered and lived here. They jerked him around for WEEKS after telling him they would provide the letter the same day each time he called. He got stuck paying taxes in Portugal because he didn't receive the letter in time and he told them each time it was urgent due to the tax deadline.
- A woman went there to do her citizenship and took the necessary paperwork and a money order to pay, since the consulate no longer accepts checks. She was told by the woman in charge that the consulate doesn't accept money orders (every consulate only accepts cash or money orders). She was convinced that the woman at the consulate has no clue what a money order is.

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## Washington DC:

- Portuguese citizens are required to use the service side entrance (alley way) or back parking lot instead of the front door. Customers are left ringing and ringing the bell and NO one answers. When going to the front door, the door man answers via a speaker and scolds you for coming to the front door. This is a total embarrassment and an insult to citizens at the primary consulate representing Portugal in the USA.
- The website does NOT provide a different address for the consulate office. And, Portuguese Citizens should NOT have to use a back door or side door.
- A local attorney has been waiting for resolution for one year. Here is a documentation of their experience:
  - June 13, 2019 -- I sent via U.S. mail a letter to Embassy with a copy of my birth certificate, a marriage certificate, my husband's birth certificate, and a money order for \$141.00.
  - June 19, 2019 -- I received an email from Judite Rebelo letting me know they had received the June 13th letter and were missing the following: consular registration form and a long form of the marriage record. I had sent certified marriage record but it was not long form.
  - June 19, 2019 -- I responded by email to Judite Rebelo that I would fill out the form she sent and asking about the long form marriage record.
  - June 20, 2019 -- I emailed Judite Rebelo with the application for registration, my naturalization certificate, and a copy of my Georgia driver's license.
  - June 21, 2019 -- Judite Rebelo emailed acknowledging receipt of above and stating she would be waiting for long form marriage certificate. I responded that it was going in the mail that same day.
  - June 21, 2019 -- I sent via U.S. mail a letter addressed to Judite Rebelo and copy of the long form marriage certificate. I also included the documents I had sent them via email on June 20th.
  - This is the last interaction I have had with the Embassy, and despite repeated follow up attempts, I haven't heard from anyone and still have not received the documents I need.