



CASEWORK NAVIGATOR

Give your team the tools they need to excel at casework.



CASEWORK BASICS

SUPPORTING CONSTITUENTS IN
OVERSEAS CRISIS SITUATIONS

developed by



SUPPORTING CONSTITUENTS IN OVERSEAS CRISIS SITUATIONS

INTRODUCTION	03
Q: DOES THE US EVACUATE AMERICAN CITIZENS AT RISK DURING OVERSEAS EMERGENCIES?	04
INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION	06
URGENT CASES	08
OTHER CONSIDERATIONS	09

last updated May 5, 2023



INTRODUCTION

Recent news of the evacuation of US Embassy personnel from Khartoum and the deteriorating security situation in Sudan reminds us how quickly situations can escalate abroad. By preparing in advance and understanding what the US government typically does (and does not do) in emergency situations, casework teams can prepare to rapidly respond to urgent constituent inquiries and set realistic expectations for constituents, their own staff, and other stakeholders.

Responsibility of Secretary of State

[22 US Code § 4802](#)

(b) Overseas evacuations The Secretary of State shall develop and implement policies and programs to provide for the safe and efficient evacuation of United States Government personnel, dependents, and private United States citizens when their lives are endangered. Such policies shall include measures to identify high risk areas where evacuation may be necessary and, where appropriate, providing staff to United States Government missions abroad to assist in those evacuations. In carrying out these responsibilities, the Secretary shall—

- (1) develop a model contingency plan for evacuation of personnel, dependents, and United States citizens from foreign countries;
- (2) develop a mechanism whereby United States citizens can voluntarily request to be placed on a list in order to be contacted in the event of an evacuation, or which, in the event of an evacuation, can maintain information on the location of United States citizens in high risk areas submitted by their relatives;
- (3) assess the transportation and communications resources in the area being evacuated and determine the logistic support needed for the evacuation; and
- (4) Develop a plan for coordinating communications between embassy staff, Department of State personnel, and families of United States citizens abroad regarding the whereabouts of those citizens.



Q: DOES THE US EVACUATE AMERICAN CITIZENS AT RISK DURING OVERSEAS EMERGENCIES?

A: It depends. An essential read for caseworkers and constituents alike is [“What the State Department Can and Can’t Do in a Crisis.”](#)

Since 2020, there have been a series of unprecedented situations involving emergencies abroad. For example:

- In early 2020, the State Department coordinated the evacuation and repatriation of over 800 American citizens (AmCits), lawful permanent residents (LPRs) and their family members from Wuhan, China. The State Department Office of Inspector General (OIG) published a fascinating [debrief](#) of this effort in 2022.
- From January 29 to June 5, 2020, the State Department assisted in repatriating more than 100,000 individuals who were in 139 countries. GAO produced another [fascinating readout](#) of this effort, including a survey conducted of American citizens who were repatriated to ask about their experiences. It’s important to note that the State Department numbers included individuals who traveled by US government chartered planes, military planes, and commercial flights.
- Since August of 2021, the State Department [has evacuated or “facilitated the relocation”](#) of over 6,000 AmCits/LPRs from Afghanistan and has conducted massive efforts through Operations Allies Welcome and Enduring Welcome to “facilitate relocation” for over 100,000 Afghan allies.



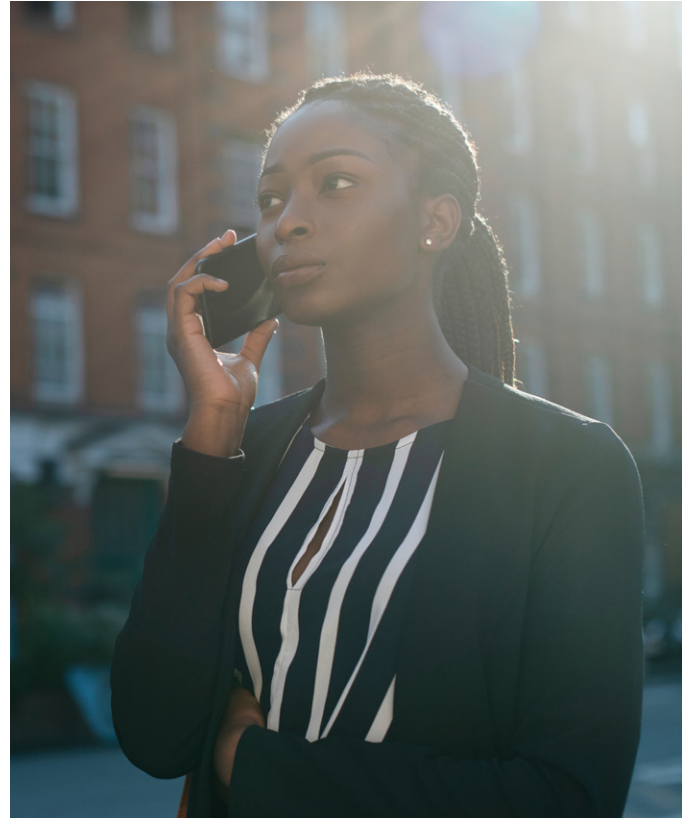
To put these recent crises in context, in the 5 years prior to the pandemic, the State Department repatriated a total of only 5,839 individuals—an average of 1,168 per year—who were in 28 countries. Earlier notable evacuations included Lebanon in 2006 (approximately 15,000 AmCits), Haiti in 2004, and Liberia in 2003.



The Role of Caseworkers During Times of Crisis

Casework teams with constituents or family members abroad during times of crisis can play a key role in several ways:

- Setting expectations and communicating timely updates to constituents and families: access to reliable, authoritative information is critical, and Congressional offices can and should work with State Department liaison personnel to be a trusted validator of accurate information.
- Verifying that information submitted directly to the State Department by constituents/family members has been received and that constituents/family members are receiving important communications timely.
- Flagging urgent cases for State: in a chaotic crisis situation, State Department personnel may miss critical cases. Caseworkers can work to flag urgent cases and help perform any necessary due diligence for State staff to help constituents.
- Coordinating with other casework teams and counterparts on the Hill to ensure Congress and Congressional staff are getting accurate, reliable information. Caseworker insight into the mechanics and constituent experience of evacuation efforts can be invaluable for oversight activities in the future.



Below, we'll review key resources to help casework teams effectively operate through these crises and best practices for escalating particularly urgent cases.



INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION

State Department “Consular on the Hill” (CoTH)

The State Department [Congressional-only website](#) and Consular on the Hill (CoTH) staff are the first line, go-to resources (get to know them before you really need them!). CoTH will likely send periodic and crisis updates to all caseworkers on their list. Casework teams should consider using the CoTH email address to request that all of their caseworkers be added to the distribution list so everyone is prepared in an “all hands on deck” emergency. Keep in mind that CoTH can quickly get swamped in a crisis, and colleagues in the House and Senate casework chat groups may be a great resource for general information and allow everyone to reserve the CoTH phone line to flag truly urgent cases.



Embassy Website

Visit the public Embassy website for the affected country first for current alerts - and check back frequently for updates. For example, The [US Embassy in Sudan](#) currently posts detailed information for American citizens including a link to a situation-specific crisis intake form and provides several recent updates. On that note, caseworkers should be familiar with two separate (but linked) registration systems operated by the State Department:



01 STEP

The State Department recommends that all US citizens traveling abroad enroll in the [Smart Traveler Enrollment Program \(STEP\)](#), which then emails updates to registrants on any issues that may affect travel, including natural disasters and political unrest. Caseworkers can encourage this registration as a first step for both routine travel and crisis situations. AmCits/LPRs should also update their information in STEP as their plans change. If constituents/family members are unable to access the STEP registration form, a caseworker can also enter the information into STEP directly.



02 Consular Affairs Crisis Management System (CACMS)

In a crisis, the State Department will also activate the [Consular Affairs Crisis Management System \(CACMS\)](#) and provide a crisis-specific “Assistance Request” form where AmCits/LPRs can enter more detailed information about their whereabouts and specific needs. The State Department will use this information to communicate with AmCits/LPRs in the crisis area AND to direct them to evacuation support, if available. Information that Congressional caseworkers provide to CoTH will also be entered in CACMS. AmCits/LPRs should submit information to the CACMS system only once unless otherwise directed by Embassy personnel. Multiple submissions will create confusion and, ultimately, could mean that some evacuation slots go unfilled while other people are still waiting in a danger zone.

American Citizens Services at the Embassy

If an Embassy is still operational, AmCits/LPRs in-country may be able to call this division of the Embassy to ask for help. In larger crises, the Embassy may transfer calls to a US-based call center. Information provided to the Embassy by phone may be entered by Embassy staff into CACMS, but if the AmCit/LPR does not receive confirmation of the entry, the caseworker should verify with CoTH that it has been received.

The American Citizens’ Services section of the Embassy website will also typically be updated with the latest situation reports.



«note»

AmCits/LPRs in an area affected by overseas crisis should register their information in **both** the STEP and CACMS systems. If there is any question about whether the registration has been received, caseworkers should send the information to CoTH and ask them to input or update the information.



URGENT CASES

Screening for Urgent Cases

In the midst of an erupting civil war, earthquake, or global pandemic, every incoming case seems urgent. To ensure that Congressional channels are available for extremely urgent cases and any cases that the State Department may have missed, caseworkers in every office have an obligation to screen for exceptional urgency and escalate those cases that meet any criteria established by the State Department or by the Member. Gaming these scenarios out before a crisis with the office leadership can be a useful exercise to prepare everyone to handle the pressure of constituent calls during a crisis.

Flagging Urgent Cases

When a case meets the established urgency criteria, the team should verify that the AmCit/LPR (or their family member) has:

- Completed [STEP](#) enrollment,
- Completed the [Consular Affairs Crisis Management System \(CACMS\)](#) “Assistance Request” form,
- Responded to any communication they have received from the Embassy or State. (Asking for copies of any communications the constituent/family member has had with the State Department can be very helpful here.)

The caseworker should email all of the pertinent information and any verification of the registration to CoTH and ask that they:

1. Verify the AmCit/LPR is on their radar (and their information is in CACMS and STEP), and
2. Consider the request related to the exceptional urgency of the situation.

At this point, the caseworker should set communication expectations with the constituent/family member so that they understand that a response is pending and the office is doing everything it can.



Escalating Urgent Cases

There will be times when the caseworker or others on the team feels that a case warrants escalation above CoTH. Before asking the Member to call or enlisting the intervention of Hill counterparts, the team should consider consulting (by phone if possible) with the CoTH staff. They may be able to escalate or provide a more nuanced explanation of the situation. If further escalation is pursued, the caseworker should provide a summary of all of the actions taken to date and include all of the information that has already been submitted to the State Department.

When escalating a case, it's important for the caseworker to maintain visibility and communication with the constituents, particularly if Hill staff are escalating to State Department staff who don't routinely handle casework.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Cost of Evacuation

When commercial options are available, the State Department will urge AmCits/LPRs to use them to depart the country. Since short-notice flights may cost more, constituents may mistakenly believe that they will pay less or nothing if they are evacuated by the US government. In fact, they will be required to sign a promissory note if they board a US government-sponsored flight and then may need to pay for onward travel from a third country anyway. The State Department advises AmCits/LPRs and their families to leave on the first transport they are able and eligible to board. Refer to [FAQs](#) for more information on these questions.

Communication with AmCits/LPRs Abroad

In crisis situations, constituents and their families may be communicating via non-traditional channels such as WhatsApp, Signal, etc. The State Department can also communicate via these channels and those numbers should be specified when submitting inquiries.

The casework team should consult with their Member office Systems Administrator or IT lead, ideally in advance of a crisis, to clarify which of these channels/platforms are authorized and set up profiles for those that are. Casework staff should also verify they have access to international calling from all of their work stations (including remote work).



Tracking the News

To stay abreast of the latest information, the casework team should also monitor social media including WhatsApp group chats, Facebook, Signal chats, and Twitter. Embassies will often use Twitter to push out time-sensitive information quickly.

Repatriation of Deceased Constituents/Family Members

Thankfully, this is a less common request, but one that will require a high level of sensitivity. The normal process for returning the remains of an American who dies abroad is outlined [by the State Department](#) but is governed by a [complex set of international, state, and local agencies and rules](#). Funeral directors are a critical partner and it is often helpful for the caseworker to speak directly to the funeral director about logistics.

When an American Citizen dies abroad in a crisis situation where the US is engaged in a risky or logistically challenging evacuation, the normal processes may be difficult to execute and information may be difficult to obtain. The casework team can serve as a source of comfort and an information conduit for the family. In rare cases, the US government or overseas officials may determine that evacuation of survivors takes immediate priority over repatriation of remains. The casework team should stay in close touch with constituent family members but remain sensitive to the bigger picture.

While waiting for the State Department and overseas authorities to evacuate the remains, the casework team may wish to consult with the funeral director and local airport authorities to ensure a more seamless arrival once the remains are en route.

Self-care/Burnout

Casework during international crises is rife with ambiguity and stress. Am I doing everything I can? Should my member be chartering a plane for those 40 constituents? Can I rely on my agency contacts to track my cases? Where does my responsibility for the outcome end?

We'll tackle these issues in more detail in a future webinar, but supporting the team starts with acknowledging the trauma that staff experience in doing this work and tuning into the stress level of the team members. Casework teams may find it especially helpful to cross-train key caseworkers (and members of the DC team) on handling crisis and disaster casework so that caseworkers can collaborate or take "shifts" in emergencies.

Planning ahead for crisis situations can help staff answer some of those questions and create a supportive framework for the team to meet constituents in their most difficult moments.



CASEWORK **BASICS**

Caseworkers often report frustration with finding basic resources on setting up and running a standout casework operation. Our free Casework Basics program fills in the gaps between existing casework resources and on-the-ground wisdom, and serves as a central clearing point for internal and external information on casework.

01 DEFINITION &
RULES

04 AGENCY
CORRESPONDENCE

02 STRUCTURING A CASEWORK
OPERATION

05 CLOSING
CASES

03 CASEWORK
INTAKE

06 SAFEGUARDING
CONSTITUENT INFO

Available now at
popvox.org/casework

PROFESSIONAL **DEVELOPMENT**

For offices interested in taking their casework operations to the next level, we offer a subscription-based professional development program exploring elements of standout casework. In particular, the program will focus on what caseworkers can learn from other industries and fields, and how casework teams can focus on process efficiency and effectiveness.

Learn more at
popvox.org/casework



CASEWORK NAVIGATOR

Give your team the tools they need to succeed.