



NIAGARA COUNTY
PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICE

MEDIA RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: CHRISTIAN W. PECK
PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER
TEL: (716) 439-7241
FAX: (716) 439-7058

February 25, 2010

COUNTY PASSPORT OFFICE FIRST TO UNDERGO STATE DEPT CERTIFICATION
JAGOW SEEKS TO EXPAND TRAINED PASSPORT CLERKS

LOCKPORT—Passport acceptance agents from the Niagara County Clerk's Office were among the very first in the nation to receive soon-to-be-mandated training and certification Thursday from U.S. State Department personnel.

A three-member team from the National Passport Center in Portsmouth, N.H. spent more than six hours instructing County Clerk's Office employees on passport regulations and their obligations as acceptance agents. An in-depth test was administered at the end of the day's training.

The certification effort is part of an initiative by County Clerk Wayne F. Jagow to ensure Western New Yorkers can continue to avail themselves of the rapid, one-stop-shopping passport center in his Lockport office. By being one of the very first counties to undergo the new certification program, Jagow's passport office will not be disrupted when the new training and certification process becomes mandatory—a requirement that meant even Jagow's most senior passport personnel took part in the training.

"Wayne really was concerned with making sure we're able to provide this service even during high-demand periods, given our proximity to the international border," said Joan Pickles, passport supervisor for the Niagara County Clerk's Office. "Our residents know they can apply for passports, get their photos taken, and get questions answered all in one very quick visit to the Clerk's Office, and we believe that's a service they've come to expect. We wanted to make sure that when these new requirements are set in place, our personnel are all trained and certified."

Pickles said that Jagow has also decided to train two additional Clerk's Office employees to process passport applications, a move that will be particularly important at the frequent off-site passport application events held by the Clerk's Office. Under that program, larger groups of applicants have the option of passport clerks coming to them with applications and cameras instead of making the trip to Lockport.

Demand for the travel documents climbed last year after the federal government imposed new, stricter travel rules as part of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative.

"The passport is a real necessity for many of our residents, with Canada as our western neighbor," Pickles said. "I think we take extra steps to ensure our residents get the service they need."

As passport supervisor, Pickles is the senior and most experienced of the passport acceptance agents in Jagow's office. That didn't spare her from having to take part in Thursday's training and certification process, however.

"It was a very intense course," Pickles said. "But that makes sense. Passport application offices like the one we operate at the Niagara County Clerk's Office are the first line of defense for the Department of

State against some real concerns, like identity theft and fraud. So, while it was a very intense day-long training session for us, the material covered was really timely.”

The six-hour course covered everything from common requirements for filling out paperwork associated with passport applications to training passport agents in spotting fake and illegitimate identity documents.

“Everything we learned was about making our country more secure, but also minimizing the inconvenience for all of the law-abiding citizens who apply for passports every day,” Pickles.

Pickles also praised the State Department presenters for their professionalism.

“There was a lot of mutual respect and honest dialogue,” she said. “They understand that, without us, it would be very hard for the State Department to reliably issue passports. They were very open to questions, and very helpful. I think all of our acceptance clerks are better for the training.”

###