

Engineered to be both a document repository and an on-line discussion forum, the Virtual Secretariat is accessible only to members 24 hours a day. This allows participants to enter queries, comments and replies during their regular working hours without having to resort to middle-of-the-night conference calls.

The site administrator monitors the site daily. Of the 30 eligible participants, 20 members have registered for access to the site so far. Still in its early stages, the full potential of the site has yet to be realized. Progress of the virtual forum is evaluated quarterly by the Five Nations.

## New Application Forms

Three years ago, the Passport Office began the daunting task of re-designing our forms to make them easy to download from the Web site. The new format allows the forms to be printed on letter-size paper.

The new forms for Canadians residing in the United States were the first available on-line in September 2000. The hard copy was released in December along with electronic and hard copies for other forms. By February 2001, the new forms were in use throughout the Passport Office. We are now in the process of supplying Canada Post outlets with the new forms.

All 16 passport forms have now been redesigned and will be published in hard and electronic versions by January 2002.

## The Backlog

The demand for passports peaks each year during the winter months. In early 2001, peak demand was higher than usual and, combined with a slowdown caused by the introduction of IRIS, this resulted in an unprecedented backlog at the Hull production centre. Our normal 10-working-day turnaround time stretched out to 29 days. This, in turn, led to a flood of calls and e-mail inquiries from applicants wondering why their passports were not ready.

To address this extraordinary situation, emergency measures were implemented. Examiners worked extended hours including weekends. Call Centre staff was increased to deal with the overload of inquiries and examiners were brought in from Montréal to help out in the production centre. Thanks to such efforts on the part of Passport Office staff, processing time was restored to our 10-day service standard within three weeks.

## The Passport Recall

In November 2000, passports issued by the North York office were printed with bar codes that were not machine-readable. When the error was discovered, the Passport Office moved to recall and reissue 10,000 passports. Canadian missions abroad and foreign authorities were immediately informed and databases were created to develop, print and mail out recall letters. Space had to be located and rented to set up a temporary production area where clients could be served with a minimum of inconvenience. Once again, staff rallied together in an amazing demonstration of teamwork and the situation was soon rectified.