

**** DRAFT ****

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

We, the undersigned mayors, write to request your assistance on a critical issue that is affecting the cities and counties we lead. As a lingering result of the pandemic's peak, a severe backlog in the processing of U.S. visitor visas is now delaying – in some instances well over a year – the visitation of foreign travelers from key markets who provide much-needed economic and diplomatic benefits to the nation.

While the State Department has reduced processing times for certain visa categories, including students, seasonal workers and crewmembers, first-time visitor visa applicants in the largest countries for inbound travel are currently facing interview wait times of more than 400 days. We strongly urge you to take steps to lower these wait times for U.S. B-1 and B-2 visitor visas.

In 2019, 43 percent of international visitors – and \$120 billion in spending – came from countries where a visa is required to enter the United States. The U.S. Travel Association projects that American businesses will lose 6.6 million potential visitors and \$11.6 billion in spending in 2023 alone as a result of likely international travelers' inability to secure a visitor visa. Extreme delays are harming travel dependent businesses in our cities and counties. Very long wait times for visa interviews stifle local economies as we all strive to fully recover from the pandemic.

Due to the lack of prioritization of visitor visa categories, cities and counties are missing out on the opportunity to compete for millions of international visitors due to U.S. visa processing delays. Local economies lose because international business and leisure travelers spend more money on their trips to the United States than domestic travelers. And it's a loss for people in our communities whose loved ones can't attend important life events because they are being forced to wait close to a year-or more- to obtain visas.

In addition to the economic benefits that support jobs for workers in our communities, international inbound travel is a positive force for America's public diplomacy. When millions of travelers from around the world safely visit the United States, they return home with countless stories of the experiences that only America can provide.

Simply stated, we should take every step possible to accelerate the return of international travel to the United States. Improving visa processing times in top source markets will aid the economic recovery and position us to compete as a top destination for the global travelers that our cities desire to welcome.

We ask that you consider the following recommendations to improve visitor visa processing:

1. Set clear timelines to restore efficient visa processing. Lower wait times to 21 days in the top countries for inbound travel by April 2023
2. By September 31, 2023, reinstate the Executive Order to provide interview appointments for 80% of nonimmigrant visa applicants within 21 days or less
3. Increase consular staffing and resources in countries with a high volume of applicants and for large events in the U.S. that draw international visitors.
4. Extend interview waivers for nonimmigrant visa renewals and apply waivers more broadly to renewal applicants who are considered low risk through 2024

From the progress that your agency has achieved in other visa classifications, it's clear that the State Department is capable of taking positive steps on visa issuance when it devotes adequate resources to swift and focused processing. We ask that you make international visitor visa processing a top priority and eliminate what is currently a major deterrent to tourism in the United States.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

MAYOR SIGNATORIES