

U.S. TRAVEL ASSOCIATION®

March 8, 2021

Dear Member of Congress:

U.S. Travel Association is a national nonprofit organization, comprised of more than 1,100 members representing every aspect of the American travel industry. The COVID-19 pandemic poses a unique challenge to the travel community—inhibiting both domestic and international travel and related activities—leading to massive job loss and economic instability.

To help address the long-term impact of the pandemic on the travel economy and increase overall economic opportunity, we respectfully request that you consider the following policy priorities as you work to develop appropriations bills for fiscal year 2022.

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE APPROPRIATIONS

TRAVEL EXPORT PLAN

Prior to the pandemic, travel and tourism was America's largest service export, adding \$2.6 trillion to the economy each year, which supported 15.8 million jobs and produced a \$59 billion travel trade surplus. However, the restrictions surrounding COVID-19 has led to a 76% decline in travel exports. To help restore and grow U.S. travel exports, we suggest the following committee report language:

Committee Report Language: The Committee directs the Department of Commerce, in consultation with the Department of Homeland Security, Department of Transportation, Department of State, and Department of Health and Human Services, to develop a plan to restore international visitation to the U.S. as COVID-19 vaccinations increase and COVID-19-related hospitalizations decline. Within 90 days of the date of enactment of this Act, the Department shall publish a report detailing the plan, along with legislative and administrative recommendations for increasing travel exports over the next 5 years, which may include proposals to modernize the visa application process, increase preclearance locations, and improve the federal government's coordination with domestic stakeholders to increase U.S. competitiveness for international trade shows and sporting events.

BEA TRAVEL AND TOURISM SATELLITE ACCOUNT

The Bureau of Economic Analysis's (BEA's) Travel and Tourism Satellite Account is an indispensable statistical instrument that allows the Commerce Department to accurately measure the state of the travel industry relative to other U.S. industries, along with measuring the overall competitiveness of the United States relative to other countries. To ensure BEA can continue to provide this valuable information, we suggest the following appropriation set-aside:

Appropriation: Provided that \$4,000,000 remain available for the Bureau of Economic Analysis's Travel and Tourism Satellite Account.

EDA DOMESTIC TRAVEL PROMOTION GRANTS

Previous rounds of grantmaking through the Economic Development Administration (EDA) have largely ignored the needs of communities that rely on travel as a significant source of economic activity. EDA Regional Directors openly admitted to favoring applicants who previously won awards, rather than travel-dependent applicants, many of whom have a greater need but less experience with the agency.

To correct for this institutional bias, it is necessary to clarify congressional intent to ensure travel promotion projects are competitively considered within the grantmaking process:

Committee Report Language: *The Economic Development Administration shall give fair consideration to applicants requesting funds for travel promotion activities when awarding Economic Adjustment Assistance grants.*

DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY APPROPRIATIONS

REAL ID ACT ENFORCEMENT DELAY

On October 1, 2021, the Transportation Security Administration will no longer accept an ordinary driver's license as a valid form of identification unless it meets the strict requirements of the REAL ID Act. That means millions of Americans will be turned away at the airport security checkpoint if they don't have a REAL ID-compliant driver's license or another accepted form of ID, like a passport or military ID.

To avoid this scenario, we suggest the following bill text to prohibit funds from being used to enforce the REAL ID Act for air travel, until either (1) TSA makes alternative screening procedures available to passengers or (2) DHS certifies to Congress that at least 85% of state-issued identification held by Americans is REAL ID-compliant:

Bill Text: *No funds shall be used by the Transportation Security Administration to implement Section 202(a)(1) of the REAL ID Act of 2005 until—*

- (1) the Secretary of Homeland Security makes alternative screening procedures (in accordance with section 7220(c) of Title VII, P.L. 108–458 (49 U.S.C. 44901 Note)) widely available for passengers who do not have credentials that meet the requirements of Section 202 of the REAL ID Act of 2005 (49 U.S.C. § 30301 Note); and*
- (2) the Secretary certifies to Congress that at least 85% of state-issued identification held by Americans meets the minimum standards established under Section 202 of the REAL ID Act of 2005.*

TSA TOUCHLESS TECHNOLOGY PLAN

In order to meet the challenges of evolving security threats, health risks, increasing demand for air travel and resource constraints, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) needs to make substantial progress in making touchless identification technology widely available to travelers as an alternative to card-based identification procedures, particularly for those proven to be a low security risk, such as those enrolled in TSA PreCheck. Therefore, we suggest the following report language:

Committee Report Language: *TSA shall provide activity-level details in its budget justification materials for activities associated with the development and implementation of voluntary, accurate, reliable and secure biometric identification services for passengers enrolled in PreCheck, along with details on any funding needed to support such activities beyond the amounts made available through the collection of Aviation Passenger Security Fees.*

VISA WAIVER PROGRAM REBRAND

The Visa Waiver Program currently allows citizens and nationals of 39 different countries to travel to the United States for tourism or business, for stays of 90 days or less, without obtaining a visa. Despite the economic, diplomatic and security benefits of the program, its current name does not adequately reflect its merits and may instead exacerbate public misconceptions. To address this problem and build on the success of the program, we suggest the following committee report language:

Committee Report Language: *To better reflect the security and travel facilitation benefits of the Visa Waiver Program for the U.S., the Committee directs the Secretary of Homeland Security to refer to the Visa Waiver Program as the “Secure Travel Partnership” in public communications, including on the Department’s website and in published materials.*

DEPARTMENT OF TREASURY APPROPRIATIONS

PANDEMIC RISK INSURANCE STUDY

Over the past year, the pandemic has brought to light gaps in business interruption and event cancellation insurance coverage, with many travel businesses unable to access affordable coverage for pandemic-related losses. Meanwhile, the few that were previously covered are now seeing insurers reduce their offerings for future coverage. To help inform decisionmakers on the state of pandemic risk insurance, we suggest the following report language directing the Treasury Department’s Office of Domestic Finance to study the issue:

Committee Report Language: *Within 120 days of the date of enactment of this Act, the Office of Domestic Finance shall submit a report to Congress on the 5-year outlook for pandemic risk coverage in business interruption and event cancellation insurance, including legislative recommendations to ensure such coverage remains affordable and available to all types of businesses in all areas of the country.*

DEPARTMENT OF STATE APPROPRIATIONS

VISA APPLICATION BACKLOG & WAIT TIMES

Between 2015 and 2018, the U.S.’s share of the global travel market slid 2 percentage points, partially due to lengthy wait times for U.S. B1 and B2 visas, particularly when it comes to visa adjudication interviews. For example, in recent years, U.S. embassies and consulates in China, Israel, India, Costa Rica, South Africa and Colombia saw visa interview wait times regularly exceeding 10 days. The pandemic only exacerbated this problem when the State Department suspended routine visa services at most U.S. Embassies and Consulates.

Under 8 U.S.C. § 1202(h)(1), the State Department is given authority to utilize alternatives to in-person meetings for visa adjudication interviews. We believe with the increasing advancement of biometric technology and other security protocols, video conferencing technology could be used to not only safely and securely address the current application backlog (estimated to be as high as 380,000), but also avoid excessive wait times going forward. Therefore, we suggest the following committee report language:

Committee Report Language: *The State Department shall consider using remote video teleconferencing solutions in visa adjudication interviews to address the backlog of visa applications and consistently maintain reasonable wait times for such interviews.*

Thank you for your consideration.