

# ADDRESSING VISA PROCESSING CHALLENGES: Essential to Restoring International Inbound Travel

The COVID-19 pandemic essentially grounded international travel, and with it nearly all visa processing, came to a standstill. Fear of transmitting the virus resulted in not only closing borders, embassies, and consulates around the world but also prevented The State Department's processing of both immigrant and nonimmigrant visas.

## The travel and tourism industry, and the U.S. economy will not fully recover without restoring international travel.

As the number two U.S. export, travel and tourism has historically generated a large surplus for the economy. In 2019, travel exports totaled \$234 billion and delivered a \$51 billion surplus and directly supported 1.2 million American jobs. However, the steep decline in travel because of the pandemic resulted in the loss of \$150 billion in export income in 2020 alone and an estimated loss of \$85 billion in the first half of 2021. As a result, 1.1 million jobs have been lost.

If international travel remains stagnant, the **U.S. can be expected to lose an *additional* \$90 billion in export income in the *second half* of the year—for a total loss of \$325 billion in 2020 and 2021 combined—and more than 1 million American jobs will not be restored.**

## Visa processing delays and restrictions severely hamper the ability of many international travelers to enter the U.S., from students, visitors, seasonal workers, etc.

- Two-thirds of the 74 million business and leisure travelers arriving in the U.S. in 2019 required a B1 or B2 visa
- As of May 2021, just over one million immigrant visas were in various states of processing, more than twice the total of immigrant visas issued in 2019, according to The State Department
- Just 57 of 237 visa processing sites were fully operational and three-quarters of consulates conducting visa processing are either fully or partially closed as recently as early April

**As long as visa processing sites remain fully or partially closed, the backlog and wait times for visas will grow.** As many as 71% of visa applications could be added to the backlog per month. For context, if the same hinderance were applied in April 2019, approximately 600,000 of the 850,000 visas processed would have been added to the backlog.

- Eager business and leisure travelers are met with long visa processing delays, deterring travel
  - **The average wait for a business or tourism visa is currently more than three months (95 days), and longer than 6 months for nearly one-quarter (22%) of visas**

# In order for international travel to recover, the administration must address the many pathways in which international travelers seek entry.

The countries targeted by President Biden's working groups, charged with determining a pathway to reopen travel, represent just a fraction of the total visas issued in 2019.

While international travel is limited or completely restricted from many of our top inbound markets, visa processing closures and delays create a de-facto border closure for travelers who need a new visa for entry even from countries that are technically 'open'.

**Without addressing border closures and visa processing, international travel will be unable to fully reopen, threatening the 1.2 million American jobs that rely in international visitation.**

## OUR ASK:

**To effectively resume adequate visa operations and address the visa application backlog, the Administration should:**

- ✓ **Develop a Plan to Restore Routine Operations at U.S. Embassies and Consulates.** Developing a risk-based plan for how and when to resume routine operations will ensure all U.S. Embassies and Consulates are reopened in a clear, consistent, and predictable manner.
- ✓ **Take Steps to Streamline and Modernize Visa Adjudication.** Existing waivers for in-person interviews should be temporarily expanded to additional low-risk, visa renewals. Video conferencing technology can also be implemented to satisfy interview requirements, which will reduce face-to-face interactions, and help keep consular officers safe, increase processing capacity and reduce the backlog of applications across all visa classes.
- ✓ **Ensure Priorities for Visa Processing Supports U.S. Economic Recovery Efforts.** America's travel industry was the hardest hit sector of the economy due to COVID-19—travel-supported jobs accounted for 65% of all jobs lost during 2020. Restoring travel jobs and spending to pre-pandemic levels cannot happen until international inbound travel fully resumes, which economists predict could take four years or more. To help accelerate economic recovery in America's travel industry, the State Department should prioritize processing for visas in high demand regions and for large international group tours to alleviate future visa processing backlogs and spur increased demand for international travel to the U.S.