

U.S. TRAVEL ASSOCIATION

Gateway to Jobs & Growth: Creating a Better Traveler Entry Process

Key Findings

Millions of travelers choose not to visit the United States because our current entry process is too often slow and confusing, creating an unwelcoming environment for our international guests. Billions of dollars and thousands of U.S. jobs are at risk.

- 30 percent of overseas passengers wait in U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) processing lines longer than 30 minutes.
- Time spent by visitors standing in an entry line, rather than spending money in our economy, costs travel-related businesses \$47 per traveler or \$416 million each year—unspent dollars that could support 3,700 jobs.
- Because negative perceptions about the entry process prevent 2.7 million visitors from taking trips to the U.S. each year (about 9.2 percent of all trips), another \$11.8 billion is lost to the travel industry annually.
- If the indirect and induced impacts are included, delaying and deterring international travelers costs the overall economy \$95 billion in total output and 518,900 jobs over five years.

Interviews with travelers indicate they think of CBP officers as competent and hard-working. The perceived problems with the U.S. entry process are not due to lack of will or skill, but to lack of adequate staffing resources.

- 43 percent of overseas travelers who have visited the country say they will recommend avoiding a trip to the U.S. because of the entry process.
- Among overseas business travelers, 44 percent say they will not visit the U.S. in the next five years because of the entry process.
- One in seven overseas visitors has missed a connecting flight to a U.S. destination because of delays in the entry process at their initial arrival airport.
- Almost two-thirds of those surveyed said that getting rid of long lines and wait times would make the U.S. a more attractive destination.
- Fully 84 percent of travelers believe the U.S. government could fix the system.

Overseas visitors spend an average of nearly \$4,500 during a U.S. visit. Delays and negative perceptions of the entry process prevent millions of travelers from visiting the U.S. These delays don't even count time spent on the tarmac, retrieving bags, or getting through airports to connecting flights—but unlike those delays, policymakers have the power to improve CBP entry.

- Each month hundreds of thousands of international visitors to the U.S. wait longer than 30 minutes to be processed, and many wait an hour or much longer.
- Over 12 months, more than 40,000 passengers waited more than two hours to be processed at the Miami International Airport (MIA).
- At New York John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK), more than 180,000 endured a two-hour wait time or greater.
- In October 2012 at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX), the average wait time was reported to be about 20 minutes, but 29 percent of passengers waited longer than 30 minutes.

- While the average wait times at MIA, JFK, LAX, Chicago O’Hare International Airport (ORD) and Washington Dulles International Airport (IAD) were usually less than 30 minutes each month, maximum wait times ranged from 90 minutes to more than four hours.

Key Policy Recommendations and Objectives

- Congress should provide appropriated funding needed to hire at least 3,500 new CBP officers allocated at air ports of entry with the goal of reducing peak wait times by 50 percent and processing each traveler within 30 minutes, and at land and sea ports of entry based on CBP’s Workload Staffing Model.
- CBP should hire part-time employees, including retired CBP officers and Transportation Security Administration officers, to handle administrative duties currently performed by full-time CBP officers.
- Airports and CBP should rapidly implement the new Automated Passport Control (APC) system that allows travelers to complete much of the immigration and customs process before proceeding to a CBP officer, with airports reimbursed for the purchase and installation of kiosks and related communications infrastructure.
- CBP should work in coordination with the Science and Technology Directorate of the Department of Homeland Security to identify new technology and procedures.
- CBP should continue to expand the Global Entry program by adding additional countries eligible for enrollment, permitting reimbursements for Global Entry interviews, and requiring the Departments of State and Homeland Security to coordinate on visa and travel applications.
- CBP should be required to coordinate staffing with airports and airlines to meet daily demand and limit wait times.
- CBP should improve transparency by sharing actual passenger wait-time data.
- Excess ESTA fees not dedicated either to CBP or to Brand USA should be deposited in a new CBP Travel Facilitation Account to be used at airports serving as ports of entry into the U.S.
- To reduce administrative costs and provide CBP with additional funding, Congress should consolidate existing immigration, customs, and agriculture fees collected by CBP on inbound air and sea passengers into one fee.
- Congress should require CBP to issue a public report on its current fee collection process, administrative costs associated with the process, and the current allocation of the funds between air, land and sea ports of entry.
- Congress should restore CBP’s access to passenger fees imposed on travelers from Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean to reinvest in officer staffing; and CBP, OMB and Congress should release previously collected fees from travelers to invest in facilitation.
- Congress should require DHS to collect and analyze traveler feedback across all component agencies including CBP; to consider customer service during officer evaluations; and to report traveler feedback to the Department of Transportation for publication in its monthly Air Travel Consumer Report.

The comprehensive immigration reform bill passed by the U.S. Senate (S. 744) provides for an additional 3,500 CBP officers and calls for reducing average primary processing wait times at high-volume international airports by 50 percent. The bill also sets a goal of screening 80 percent of air passengers being processed at high-volume international airports within 30 minutes by the end of fiscal year 2016. In addition, both the Senate and House appropriations bills for the Department of Homeland Security include significant increases in officer staffing.

As the U.S. House of Representatives continues work on immigration reform and the Congress finalizes FY ‘14 funding bills, it is critical that Congress addresses the CBP entry process by providing the necessary staffing and setting appropriate metrics for a more efficient entry system.