

UNITED STATES TRAVEL AND TOURISM ADVISORY BOARD

September 7, 2022

The Honorable Gina Raimondo
Secretary of Commerce
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Secretary Raimondo:

In light of the significant impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the travel and tourism industry, you requested that the U.S. Travel & Tourism Advisory Board (TTAB) provide recommendations on federal actions that will benefit the U.S. travel and tourism industry and the economy overall. The TTAB was asked to develop recommendations for increasing business travel in the pandemic recovery period, a segment of travel hit particularly hard by COVID-19. The business travel sector is a material segment of the overall industry, with U.S. business travel spending exceeding \$306 billion in 2019¹.

While much of the travel industry has experienced significant recovery in volumes during late 2021 and the first half of 2022, the business travel segment's recovery has continued to lag and spending in this segment remains depressed. According to the U.S. Travel Association, business travel spending in 2021 only reached 41% of pre-pandemic volumes². To this end, you asked the TTAB to determine actions that could accelerate and enhance the level of business travel.

A number of challenges remain for the business travel segment, including COVID-era travel restrictions, industry-wide staffing shortages, the changing travel experience, and the economic environment, but there are actions that can be taken that will increase the level of business travel spend and enhance economic recovery of the travel and tourism industry. The recommendations outlined below were identified because they are highly actionable and will have a relatively swift impact on the business travel sector of the industry.

These recommendations include the following and are outlined in more detail below:

1. Improve visa processing wait times and inefficiencies
2. Restore the level of government spending on travel to pre-pandemic levels
3. Address issues with the existing travel experience

Visa Backlog and Timing

The average visa interview wait time for the U.S.'s top 10 visa-required inbound countries has increased significantly during the pandemic, with an average wait time of over 400 days as of May 2022³. Improving visa processing wait times and inefficiencies will not only allow more international leisure and business travelers to come to the U.S., but will also help those

¹ <https://www.ustravel.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/ust-data-master.pdf>

² <https://www.ustravel.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/ust-data-master.pdf>

³ <https://www.ustravel.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/visaprocessing-factsheet.pdf>

businesses that rely on temporary workers, including many in the travel industry, to meet their staffing needs. Working with the Departments of State and Homeland Security, we recommend that the following actions be considered in addressing the existing backlog and extended processing times, but with all actions conducted without compromising the safety and security of the country:

- A) Fully restore U.S. visa processing operations and increase staffing to process visas,
- B) Develop a program for the use of videoconferencing technology in visa interviews, and
- C) Over the long term, expand the Visa Waiver Program to additional qualified countries

Increasing Government Spending on Travel

Restoring government travel spend to pre-pandemic levels would be consistent with the existing philosophy of leading by example and creating a common voice from the government in support of travel. Several critical elements are recommended in achieving these objectives:

- A) Ensure per diem rates are in line with current market rates, fair to both federal travelers and the hospitality industry, and
- B) Encourage in-person meeting and events within the government under proper health and safety conditions.

Improving the Travel Experience

And lastly, the travel experience itself must be improved. Ensuring efficient and predictable transit through security is important for all travelers, but especially for business travelers who need to prioritize effective use of time and resources. To achieve this goal, we recommend working with the Department of Homeland Security to increase TSA staffing levels to pre-pandemic levels and utilize all available technology to reduce wait times and enhance the passenger experience. Specifically, this action would include:

- A) TSA Precheck lines be reopened at multiple locations within heavily traveled airports and terminals to ensure they are available to more travelers, especially business travelers who are a high subscriber to the TSA Precheck program.
- B) TSA staffing increases applied such that security wait times are more consistent and predictable – a critical element for smooth business travel.
- C) Leverage other existing partnerships, such as CLEAR, to streamline the security experience and reduce wait times overall to aid in a smoother in airport experience which will benefit all travelers.

Lastly, we believe you have a unique opportunity and platform through your interactions with the largest companies in the U.S. to continue to urge businesses to restore travel spending to benefit not only the travel industry, but the U.S. economy as a whole, and would urge you to leverage this platform during other meetings and interactions.

We believe that these recommendations will have a meaningful impact on improving and restoring business traveler confidence and business travel spending. Ensuring that business travel recovers in the same manner as leisure is important given the historically higher rates paid by business travelers, which play a material role in the profitability of the industry and its success long term.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Brad Dean". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Bill Hornbuckle
Chair

Brad Dean
Vice Chair