

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 17, 2023

Assistant Secretary Rena Bitter
Bureau of Consular Affairs
U.S. Department of State
2201 C St., NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Assistant Secretary Bitter,

As an important aspect of screening potential travelers to the United States, we write to inquire about steps that the Bureau of Consular Affairs is taking to address delays in visa processing. Constituents across our states have reported that delays in the processing of visas have kept employees, loved ones, and friends waiting to travel to the United States—in some cases for over two years.

Currently, the average wait time for an appointment at a U.S. consulate for a visitor visa is twenty-five weeks, but these wait times vary from consulate to consulate. While it might take 40 days to schedule a visa appointment in the United Kingdom, wait times are up to a year and three months in Brazil and two years and eight months for visa appointments in India. Likewise, wait times for temporary worker visas can extend beyond 200 days at some U.S. consulates in India, and student visa interview appointment wait times range from 1 day to 414 days.¹

These delays impact industries, businesses, universities, and families across the United States. Businesses that rely on tourism suffer when would-be customers cannot get a visa appointment in a timely manner. According to the U.S. Travel Association, the average overseas visitor spends approximately \$3,700 when they visit the United States and stays an average of 17 nights.²

In addition, processing delays make the United States a less attractive place for companies to do business. These delays have reportedly hindered companies from bringing key employees to the United States on L-1 and H-1B visas, and even from building out new operations that these employees would have supported.³ Similarly, companies in the United States are deterred from

¹ U.S. Department of State, *Global Visa Wait Times* (last updated Jan. 24, 2023), <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/visa-information-resources/global-visa-wait-times.html>.

² U.S. Travel Association, *U.S. Travel Answer Sheet* (May 2022), <https://www.ustravel.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/ust-data-master.pdf>

³ Genevieve Douglas & Martha Mueller Neff, *Visa Bottlenecks Are Creating Headaches for Employers, Workers*, BLOOMBERG LAW (Aug. 16, 2022, 5:15 a.m.), <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/daily-labor-report/visa-bottlenecks-are-creating-headaches-for-employers-workers>.

hosting conferences and trainings because they do not know whether international employees will be able to get B-1/B-2 visas approved in time. One local business looking to host training seminars for its overseas employees reported that the earliest it could get a visa appointment for its employees was February 2024.

These delays also keep families apart. Constituents who are in the process of bringing their immediate relatives to the United States have reported waiting over a year for an appointment for an immigrant visa. These also include appointments for visa beneficiaries who have current priority dates under the worldwide immigration levels established by Congress. We have also heard of processing delays for prospective adoptive parents and families unable to gather for weddings or other important events.

We acknowledge the administration's attempts to decrease wait times by employing critical technology, working across countries, and improving transparency.⁴ We understand that the Department is working through significant visa requests after the evacuation of Afghanistan and Russia's illegal and unprovoked war in Ukraine. Unfortunately, delays in consular processing continue to present roadblocks for both the businesses and communities that rely on our legal immigration system and temporary guest worker, student, and tourist visas to drive our economy and culture.

It is important that the Department continue to take steps to provide visa appointments in a timely manner so the United States can continue to welcome visitors and friends who are qualified for visas and who help our communities and our country thrive. Accordingly, we ask that you answer the follow questions by March 10, 2023:

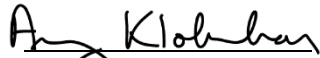
1. What steps has the Department taken, and what steps does it plan to take, to speed up consular processing times across all visa categories experiencing backlogs? How is the Department working with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services to address this issue?
2. Has the Department considered video interviews for certain visa applicants? In making these determinations, how is the Department prioritizing national security considerations?
3. We recognize many consular officers have recently left the Department.⁵ What steps is the Department taking to retain and recruit officers to perform consular work overseas? Has the Department considered the potential to ask former employees or other former federal employees with the requisite foreign language skills, including as veterans, to step in? What considerations, if any, limit the Department's availability to do so?
4. Has the Department developed a strategy to reduce visa interview wait times across all categories to acceptable levels, and what support can Congress provide to facilitate this goal?


⁴ See U.S. Department of State, *Addressing U.S. Visitor Visa Wait Times* (Nov. 17, 2022), <https://www.state.gov/addressing-u-s-visitor-visa-wait-times/>


⁵ See Michelle Hackman, *U.S. Vows to Tackle Visa Delays as Frustrations Mount*, WALL STREET JOURNAL (Nov. 17, 2022, 4:20 p.m.), https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-vows-to-tackle-visa-delays-as-frustrations-mount-11668718834?mod=us_more_pos1

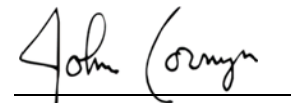
5. A 2012 executive order required the Department to issue an average of 80 percent of nonimmigrant visas within three weeks.⁶ What, if any, considerations constrain the Department's ability to implement such a policy now?


Sincerely,

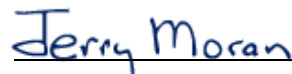

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⁶ Exec. Order No. 13,597, 77 Fed Reg. 3373 (Jan. 19, 2012), *available at* <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2012/01/24/2012-1568/establishing-visa-and-foreign-visitor-processing-goals-and-the-task-force-on-travel-and>.