



Travel Industry Association

NON-IMMIGRANT (VISITOR) VISAS TRANSITION BRIEFING PAPER DEPARTMENT OF STATE

BACKGROUND: Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, needed reforms to safeguard America's travel systems were instituted across U.S. government departments. The U.S. visa application and review process carried out by the Department of State, for instance, underwent significant security changes including a near 100 percent interview requirement for non-immigrant visa (NIV) applicants. This concerted effort to safeguard the U.S. visa issuance process, however, was not matched with staffing, resources, technology or new programs to ensure the continued timely and efficient processing of visa applications. As a result, visa wait times at the State Department's 211 visa-issuing posts around the world have often exceeded the 30-day processing standard set by State. A U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report issued in July 2007 noted that almost half of the State Department's visa-issuing posts at that time reported maximum wait times for visa interviews of 30 or more days and that interview waits were 30 plus days every month at 20 posts. As a result, foreign travel professionals and travelers report a growing negative perception about the U.S. visa issuance process. For instance, a June 2006 survey by the Travel Industry Association and completed by 155 international travel professionals throughout the world showed that travelers are choosing to travel to other destinations instead of the U.S. in part because of viewed visa requirements, "hassle," price and the perception that the U.S. is unwelcoming.

ISSUES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

1. **Minimize Visa Interview Wait Times through More Efficient Staffing:** Visa processing delays result in a disincentive for those who want to visit the U.S. for business, medical needs and leisure. In 2005, the National Foreign Trade Council estimated that U.S. businesses lost \$30 billion between 2002 and 2004 because of America's broken visa system.

Action Items:

- Direct resources either through the redistribution of existing applicant fees or direct appropriations to hire new consular officials at the most backlogged consulates to meet State's 30-day visa processing standard.
- State should continue to use "rapid response teams" who can be deployed to troubled spots for a limited time to clear backlogs and advise consulates on process improvements.
- Develop improved staffing allocation models to staff across shifts, working hours and peak demand periods.
- Measure wait time improvements by requiring the State Department to report to the President and Congress on its progress and issue a detailed staffing long-term plan to keep pace with visa demands.

2. **Improve Overseas Visa Facilities:** Funding for expanding and improving visa facilities or constructing new facilities overseas has been limited. The negative perception associated with the visa issuance process is heightened in countries where waits for visa interviews are long and facilities are cramped and uncomfortable for prospective visitors and consular staff.

Action Items:

- Direct greater funding to expand, improve and open new non-immigrant visa facilities in priority consulates such as China, Brazil and India.



- The Department of State should also consider adapting other existing U.S. government facilities for the purpose of visa issuance.
3. **Utilize Innovative Technology:** In many countries, would-be travelers do not live within a short distance of a U.S. consulate. For example, in Brazil and India – with a total land mass equal to or in excess of the United States – there are only four consulates in the entire country. Many travelers in these countries must incur the cost and time of a trip to the consulate just to apply for a U.S. visa. Beginning in 2006, the State Department piloted videoconferencing technology to test the viability of conducting remote visa interviews, and in fiscal year 2008, Congress directed the State Department to develop a demonstration program that would expand access to consular services through the use of mobile consular services and provided \$5 million for this purpose.

Action Item:

- Investigate the cause of the delay at the State Department for deploying the use of videoconferencing technology at U.S. consulates and work to address the problems that are hampering the deployment.
4. **Continue Improvements to Business Visa Processing:** Recognizing the importance to the U.S. economy of facilitating the visa process for business travelers, State has made progress in this area, and the U.S. has seen visa wait times for international business travelers decrease. For instance, in 2006, State established a Business Visa Center and partnered with American Chambers of Commerce around the world to help facilitate visa application procedures for U.S. businesses.

Action Items:

- In order to get the most out of the partnerships with the U.S. Chambers of Commerce, State should develop a set of best practices to distribute across its consulates.
- The State Department should also reestablish a program that allows those working in the U.S. to renew NIVs without leaving the U.S. in order to reduce the burden on consular resources and improve service to legitimate visa applicants.



Travel Industry Association

TRAVEL AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY TRANSITION BRIEFING PAPER DEPARTMENT OF STATE

BACKGROUND: The declining image of the United States abroad makes America's public diplomacy mission more important than ever. The State Department spends hundreds of millions of dollars each year for public diplomacy activities intended to win hearts and minds around the globe. In the process, State has often overlooked an effective and less expensive diplomatic tool – encouraging more international travel to the United States. Surveys show that foreign nationals who visit the United States are 74 percent more likely to leave with a favorable opinion of America and our policies. Once here, foreign visitors get to know ordinary Americans and their good intentions. When they return home, they tell family and friends about American cities and towns, beaches and mountains, ballparks and skyscrapers and farms and museums.

As columnist Thomas Friedman wrote last year, “Those who don't visit us, don't know us.” This was also one conclusion of the House Foreign Affairs Committee in June 2008 after a series of 10 hearings on the causes and effects of our deteriorating global image: “Visitors to America . . . and even their family and friends have more positive views about America and Americans.” This view is shared in many studies of how we are viewed in various regions of the world:

- *“Arabs who know Americans, Arabs who visited America . . . they tend to like our people, our culture, our products and our values more.” (Zogby International)*
- *“Attitudes about the US depend less on how much people hear about the US and more on who they hear it from. We can improve or counter negative attitudes...by increasing points of personal contact... [This] would help to ensure that the United States maintains its relative positive image among the African mass public.” (Professor Devra Moehler, Cornell University)*

Unfortunately, overseas travel to the United States has declined significantly since 9/11. The United States welcomed two million fewer overseas visitors in 2007 than in 2000. There are several reasons for the decline in travel to the United States since 9/11, but few are more powerful than a worldwide perception that travelers are not as welcome as they were previously. This perception is furthered by inefficient visa processing, a poor entry experience, inadequate communication of new U.S. security policies and countless negative stories about the U.S. travel process in the foreign press.

The United States is the world's only developed nation that invests no resources into adequately communicating its travel policies and promoting itself as a destination. In a competitive and post-9/11 marketplace, America's lack of promotion is costing the country millions of visitors, billions in spending and countless hearts and minds from around the world.

ISSUES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

1. **Establish a Travel Promotion Program:** In the U.S. Senate, both President-elect Obama and Vice-President-elect Biden, along with over half of their Senate colleagues, cosponsored S. 1661/H.R. 3232, the Travel Promotion Act (110th Congress). This legislation would establish a non-profit, public-private corporation to address these public diplomacy challenges – at no expense to the taxpayer and with enormous economic benefits in nearly every congressional district across the nation. The bill enjoys the support of the US Conference of Mayors, US Chamber of Commerce, US Olympic Committee, National Association of Manufacturers, 50 state



tourism directors, dozens of travel-related corporations and thousands of small businesses that benefit from international travelers. This fall, the bill (H.R. 3232) was passed by the full House of Representatives, after garnering the co-sponsorship of 250 House members.

Action Item:

- The new Administration should work to advance passage of the Travel Promotion Act, as part of the next economic stimulus package.
2. **Increase Number of Foreign Students:** Karen Hughes, former Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, told the Congress in 2007 that the best public diplomacy occurs through foreign student programs in the United States. If we fail to encourage student travel here, we risk squandering the opportunity to develop first-hand understandings at a formative age for a generation of foreign world leaders.

Action Item:

- Review evolving congressional proposals such as the Uniting Students in America Act, joint project of subcommittee chairmen on House Committees on Foreign Affairs and Education & Labor. This proposal seeks to engage U.S. colleges and universities and establish 30,000 scholarships annually for overseas students in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East. At a June 2008 joint subcommittee hearing on the bill, a statement from then-Senator Obama commended the sponsors and observed: “It is in our national interest to use one of America’s greatest assets, our universities, to build a global future that is marked by goodwill, not hate, and by understanding, not skepticism.”
3. **Develop Greater Coordination of Public Diplomacy Activities:** Responsibility for coordinating the federal public diplomacy mission is diffused among different federal agencies and stove-piped within each. Within the Department of State, there is confusion whether the Undersecretary or in-country consular managers are responsible for these activities globally. Between the State Department and other agencies – such as the Pentagon, Agency for International Development and Broadcasting Board of Governors – there is a perception of differing agendas, priorities and timetables.

Action Item:

- As part of a fresh approach to foreign policy objectives and methods, elevate the public diplomacy mission with the explicit goals of integrating these inter-agency efforts, improving facilitation with 21st century communications tools and demanding accountability at the highest levels to ensure results.