



# **Reviving International Travel and Tourism to Create and Restore Jobs**

**Written Statement**

**of**

**William D. Talbert, III, CDME**

**President & CEO**

**Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau**

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Tourism, Trade & Export Promotion Subcommittee**

Good afternoon Chairwoman Rosen, Ranking Member Scott, Chairwoman Cantwell, Ranking Member Wicker, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. I thank you for your leadership in addressing the pandemic's devastating economic damage, specifically to our nation's hardest hit sector, travel and tourism.

I would also like to thank U.S. Department of Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo for her recent comments expressing the Administration's commitment to the recovery of the U.S. travel and tourism industry. This is a welcome and positive sign as we work to restart all sectors of travel.

My name is William D. Talbert, III – Miami Bill as I'm known in the industry -- and I am President & CEO of the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau.

It is my honor and privilege to provide testimony on *Reviving International Travel & Tourism to Create & Restore Jobs*.

With your indulgence, I'll be reading my comments to ensure clarity of the important points presented for your consideration. In the interest of brevity, I'll also limit my CV to my written testimony and congressional record.

I represent all sectors of the hospitality industry – our 1,100-member organization includes airports, airlines, hotels, cruise lines, transportation, attractions, restaurants – and prior to the pandemic, the nearly 145,000 jobs our industry represents in Greater Miami.

Among the many industry, business and civic organizations I have served – and specific to this discussion -- I was on the U.S. Department of Commerce’s Travel & Tourism Advisory Board – named by both previous Republican and Democratic Administrations – and in leadership capacities with the US Travel Association, Destinations International, Brand USA and Visit Florida, where I worked hand-in-hand with then-Governor Scott to protect and grow our state’s primary economic generator – travel and tourism.

I also assisted with the passage of the United States Travel Promotion Act in 2009, helping establish Brand USA, our nation’s first public-private partnership promoting the US as a premier destination globally.

I’m well-known for my mantra – Jobs Jobs Jobs – and I work daily to build consensus locally, statewide and federally on behalf of the visitor industry, always emphasizing the critical role tourism plays in creating jobs, and our nation’s economic health.

Our industry has faced significant challenges throughout my career – 9/11, natural disasters, fluctuating economies, a global recession and endemic health hazards. Each time, through deft crisis management and recovery efforts, we have been able to successfully guide the safe return of business, restore consumer confidence and drive customer demand.

Never before though has the challenge been greater than this one – COVID-19. Yet we are now leading the world in successfully addressing the pandemic’s devastation and I am confident our resilient industry will once again spur our nation’s economic recovery.

Throughout my three decades stewarding our destination's sales and marketing efforts, Greater Miami has consistently posted record-breaking numbers. Prior to 2020, 24.2 million visitors generated an \$18 billion economic impact and employed nearly 145,000. Travel was our nation's second largest export, generating 15.8 million non-exportable American jobs and a trade surplus of \$51 billion.

Tourism was our #1 job creator. In Greater Miami, 167 visitors = 1 tourism job. It was also responsible for 38% of all state sales taxes collected, with international visitors paying the lion's share – 19%. These are critical dollars that directly fund transportation and healthcare services, also helping pay for schools, public safety, environmental and infrastructure projects, local arts and culture, and programs to combat homelessness and domestic violence.

This all came to a screeching halt in March of 2020. From April through December, air travel dropped 76%. PortMiami, the Cruise Capital of the World, shut down. Seven million passengers, 16% international, unable to sail. One of Miami and Florida's most powerful economic engines, PortMiami contributes \$43 billion to the economy and generates 334,500 direct and indirect jobs.

Hotel occupancy down dramatically. Hospitality jobs down dramatically. Tourist tax collections, funding much of what I've previously mentioned – down almost 70%. Throughout the country, 5.6 million hospitality jobs were lost – 65% of all jobs lost in the US.

Miami is America's gateway, leading the country in percentage of international vs domestic travelers – one-third are international.

With our borders closed to much of the world, the impact to our Florida economy and Miami's tourism industry is especially staggering.

In one year, international travel dropped 64% -- from 6.9 to 2.5 million visitors. Seemingly overnight, Miami International Airport -- the nation's 3rd busiest for international travel -- lost more than two-thirds of its passenger traffic.

More alarmingly, international visitor spending has plummeted 70%. This is critical as, while one-third of our visitors are international, they're responsible for 50% of spending.

How do we fix this? We see light at the end of the tunnel.

We're now in a position where we can restart international travel and restore jobs without compromising safety.

We need to act quickly to implement the appropriate measures to lift travel restrictions and restore demand.

- We have the right protections to safely restart international travel, but lack clear public health benchmarks or a definitive timeline to reopen. We ask that the CDC, Departments of Transportation and Homeland Security, and other agencies come together to develop a data-driven, risk-based roadmap to facilitate inbound international travel. We need uniform federal standards that can be effectively communicated to international audiences.

- The vaccination rate among U.S. adults grows rapidly each day. As we begin to reach a saturation point, vaccinated individuals should be allowed to visit the U.S. without having to have proof of a negative COVID test. Additionally, the need for quarantines has been effectively eliminated, as international passengers must now provide proof of a negative COVID 19 test within 72 hours of departure.
- We believe the resumption of travel between low-risk countries can safely resume, and the US should be a global leader in this restart. We can begin by establishing “public health corridors” between the U.S. and other low-risk countries such as the U.K and Canada. The CDC could then use clear benchmarks, such as infection and vaccination rates, to determine when entry restrictions can be lifted for other countries.
- We must allow the cruise industry to safely sail again. One of Florida and Miami’s most powerful economic engines, we lost a projected 7 million passengers, 16% international. It’s essential we restart this critical tourism sector.
- Finally, we must ensure that Brand USA, which promotes the US as a destination globally, be fully funded. They will play a key role in our recovery and helping revive international travel.

I am grateful for your leadership and remain hopeful that all segments of America’s travel industry can very soon be safely restarted. The visitor industry depends on it, as do thousands of American jobs.