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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE,
AND TRANSPORTATION

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6125

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October 20, 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
United States Department of State
2100 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

COVID-19 has devastated the travel industry more than any other sector of the economy; 40% of all jobs lost nationwide are attributable to declines in leisure and hospitality employment.¹ The \$500 billion loss in travel spending has cost the U.S. \$1.1 trillion in economic output. International travel and business travel suffered the sharpest declines. International travel spending fell 76% (compared to 34% for domestic travel) while business travel spending fell 70% (compared to 27% for leisure travel). If nothing is done to lift international travel bans and bring back demand, a coalition of travel and tourism stakeholders estimates that a total of 1.1 million American jobs will not be restored and \$262 billion in export spending will be lost by the end of 2021.²

The pandemic has proven the fragility of the tourism industry, Americans are once again traveling and re-energizing the economy. Although travel restrictions have begun to loosen in some destinations, airlines are operating over 80% below of their 2019 international schedules. Since the shutdown of passport services by the Department of State (DOS) in March 2020, the traveling public has experienced a tripling in wait times for a U.S. passport. A process that took between 4-6 weeks in 2018 is now taking up to 18 weeks in many cases. Due to the unprecedented delays, our constituents are losing thousands of dollars as they are forced to cancel international vacations for lack of passports.

Prior to the pandemic DOS recognized that some urgently departing citizens may want to further expedite their application process by using a courier service in conjunction with paying the department's expedite fee. This recognition was manifested via DOS' Hand Carry Program. The Hand Carry Program allows for the transportation of executed passport applications that are submitted to a passport agency for expedited processing, and

¹ Jessica Montevago, U.S Travel Wants Aggressive Policy Support to Keep Industry Going, TRAVEL MARKET REPORT, (last reviewed Mar. 22, 2021), <https://www.travelmarketreport.com/articles/US-Travel-Wants-Aggressive-Policy-Support-to-Keep-Industry-Going>

² Travel Industry Urges White House to Set a Timeline to Reopen International Travel, PRESS RELEASE March 22, 2021, <https://www.ustravel.org/press/travel-industry-urges-white-house-set-timeline-reopen-international-travel>

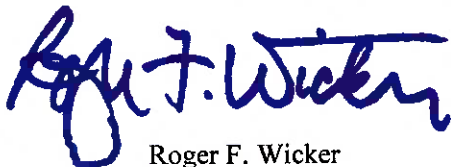
the retrieval of newly-issued, expedited passports for delivery directly or indirectly to the passport holder, based on a privilege extended by a regional passport agency to a company to conduct business. The Hand Carry Program served as an equalizer of access for all Americans citizens in need of urgent passports by allowing couriers to deliver applications in person instead of that individual having to make an extra costly trip.

Despite the value and flexibility the Hand Carry Program offers the traveling public, it has been shuttered for eighteen months. Only recently has DOS begun to accept applications via the Hand Carry Program. Unfortunately, the resumption is below pre-pandemic levels. This is even after DOS passport services were resumed last summer and the department's recent announcement of 100% staffing at passport offices.

A demand surge of at least ten million additional passport applications is anticipated this year. This is based on historical application data and the shortfall of applications received in 2020 due to the global COVID shutdown and travel restrictions. The Hand Carry Program is an efficient and COVID safe option for receipt and processing of these passport applications. Without the Hand Carry Program for urgent expediting of passports, options for receiving an emergency passport are limited to face-to-face applications at one of the DOS Passport Processing Offices located across the country. This option greatly favors citizens in proximity the larger cities where these offices are located. The remainder of our constituents are burdened with the unnecessary and excessive cost/time of traveling to one of these cities to apply in person.

The United States has faced many challenges throughout the pandemic, and now is the time for DOS to employ best practices and policies aimed at resuming safe and efficient international travel. As such, we call on you to quickly reinstate the Hand Carry Program to pre-pandemic levels of service. It might take years to restore travel and tourism to pre-pandemic levels. However, we are hopeful that resumption of programs like Hand Carry to pre-pandemic operation levels will help this sector heal and prosper once again.

Sincerely,



Roger F. Wicker
Ranking Member



Jacky Rosen
United States Senator



Rick Scott
United States Senator