



# **DEPARTMENT OF STATE**

**WRITTEN STATEMENT**

**OF**

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**FOR VISA SERVICES**

**BEFORE THE**

**SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE ON COMPETITIVENESS, INNOVATION, AND EXPORT**

**PROMOTION**

**HEARING**

**ON**

**THE TRAVEL PROMOTION ACT**

**APRIL 5, 2011**

**Chairwoman Klobuchar, Ranking Member Blunt, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee**, it is a distinct honor to share with you today the accomplishments of my colleagues in the Bureau of Consular Affairs in our efforts to facilitate the legitimate travel of millions of visitors, businesspeople, students, and others to the United States.

The good news is that international arrivals to the United States continue to climb. In 2010, 60 million international visitors entered the United States, a 17 percent increase from 2006. The Department of Commerce predicts that by 2015, international arrivals will reach nearly 83 million.

We know that international tourists, business visitors, and students boost our economy, but these visitors also leave here with a better understanding of American culture and values. According to the Department of Commerce, last year international visitors contributed \$134 billion to the U.S. economy supporting more than a million jobs. More international travel means more spending on airlines, tours, hotels, services, and export purchases, all of which means more American jobs.

For the Bureau of Consular Affairs, our challenge has been to meet the increasing worldwide visa demand from these potential visitors without compromising the security of our nation's borders. We are meeting that challenge, even as we continue to deal with new and growing demand for international travel.

After September 11, overseas travel to the United States dropped by 40 percent. Some travelers deferred trips voluntarily, while others experienced increases in

visa processing time as we implemented new security requirements in 2002 and 2003. Since 2003, however, nonimmigrant travel to the United States has grown steadily, with demand for visas rising in virtually all of our 222 visa-issuing posts worldwide. After a slight drop in visa issuances during Fiscal Year 2009—mainly because of global economic conditions and the addition of nine new countries to the Visa Waiver Program (VWP)—in Fiscal Year 2010 we saw a 7.6 percent increase in demand, to more than 8.2 million visa applications. Of those, we issued 6.4 million visas.

Through the first five months of Fiscal Year 2011, worldwide visa issuances are 13.4 percent higher compared with the same period last year.

Approximately half of the total overseas visitors to the United States enter through the Visa Waiver Program (VWP), which allows nationals of certain designated countries to enter the United States for tourism or business for up to 90 days without obtaining a visa. The VWP, administered by the Department of Homeland Security in consultation with the Department of State, added nine new countries in the last two years bringing the current number to 36 participating countries.

The greatest growth in travel comes from the world's fastest emerging economies, where we have seen demand for U.S. visas increase at a dramatic pace. Since 2005, visa issuances in China have doubled. During the same period visa issuances have climbed by 51 percent in India, 52 percent in Russia, and 24 percent in Mexico. Since 2005, visas issuances in the Middle East and North Africa have risen more than 50 percent.

In Brazil, where we maintain four visa-issuing posts—São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Brasilia, and Recife—an economic boom has created a more prosperous middle class. In five years, we have seen nonimmigrant visa issuances nearly triple to more than half a million annually. At the same time, Brazilian refusal rates for visitor visas have dropped from 20 percent to less than five percent.

### Department of State Responses to Burgeoning Demand

This growth in visa demand represents a major and ongoing challenge for the Department of State and the Bureau of Consular Affairs. We have responded with increased resources, peak season temporary staffing, management and procedural innovation, and improved technology. We still face resource gaps in some of the fastest-growing economies. We continue to focus our efforts on assisting our posts in those countries.

Since 2007, we have created 114 new consular officer positions and moved another 74 existing positions from lower to higher priority posts. We have concentrated most of our new resources in the countries with the greatest need. Twenty-four new slots went to posts in Brazil and another 24 went to China. Seventeen were added to Mexico. Another 14 new positions went to India. In October 2008, we opened a new consulate in Hyderabad, India, where a twelve-officer consular section facilitates U.S.-India trade relationships in this hub of high-technology business.

This fiscal year, at no cost to the American taxpayer, we will continue to add consular officers to our posts facing the greatest demand. Of the 20 new consular officer positions created in Fiscal Year 2011 – funded through the Machine

Readable Visa (MRV) fees paid by visa applicants – the majority are being deployed to China and Brazil. To cope with seasonal, short-term spikes in demand in Brazil and China, the Bureau of Consular Affairs also makes extensive use of temporary duty assignments.

As demand continues to rise, normal intake of Foreign Service Officers is expected to decline. For this reason, we are exploring possible alternative staffing models, which would also be funded by MRV fees. These new models include limited non-career appointments for consular adjudication staff, targeted to qualified people who already have foreign language proficiency.

The addition of nine new countries to the VWP allowed us to shift resources to other posts. While this was a welcome development, it is not a solution that can be widely applied. Adding countries to the VWP is governed by law. The countries where we have the largest resource needs presently do not meet the legal requirements to be considered for the program.

We remain aware that meeting higher visa demand is not just a matter of adding more consular officers. It also means boosting the many critical services that support our processing functions, such as administrative and clerical personnel, guards and security, information management, and communications. It means larger and better facilities and infrastructure. A greater number of visa line officers also creates the need for more supervisors, experienced consular officers who provide policy and management guidance and ensure the quality and accountability of our work. We cannot ignore the levels of adequate support and supervision that are essential to the success of any visa operation.

Wherever possible, another important goal is to maximize the resources we have on hand and consular managers are exploring new ways to manage their workflow. For example, posts in Brazil, India, and China have increased hours of operation to better utilize their overwhelmed facilities. Mexico expanded their facilities and developed more efficient procedures to handle case intake and applicant biometrics.

We have implemented policy changes making it easier in Brazil, China, India, and Mexico for applicants to apply at any of our posts in their countries, not just the one covering the “consular district” where they live. This permits more efficient use of country-wide processing capacity.

In addition, we have sent additional TDY officers to supplement posts with critical needs, including 2,128 hours of TDY time in China and 5,344 hours in Brazil over the last 18 months. We also instructed all overseas posts to establish procedures to expedite visa processing for business persons and students with time-sensitive travel.

We have consolidated and improved outsourced services for managing visa appointments at overseas posts; finding efficiencies of scale through global contracts. This new system, called the Global Support Strategy (GSS) is already in place in a number of countries, including Canada and Mexico, and other countries will transition to the new service over the coming months.

Increasing the validity length on visas is another strategy for reducing the need to re-apply for a U.S. visa. Brazilians, Indians, and Mexicans receive ten-year visas. Unfortunately, Chinese tourist and business travelers and students currently only

receive one year visas. Section 221(c) of the Immigration and Nationality Act requires us to set visa validities “insofar as practicable” to accord foreign nationals the same treatment upon a reciprocal basis that their country accords to U.S. citizens. This is not just law, but in my opinion, it is good policy. It is not in our interest, for example, to give a Chinese business traveler an advantage not available to American business travelers. Our goal is, wherever possible, to negotiate longer periods of visa validity with foreign governments, but our bottom line is equal treatment for our own citizens. We have been working with our Chinese counterparts to encourage them to cooperate on expanding reciprocity for citizens of both our countries. We also take every opportunity to encourage U.S. and Chinese business leaders to make this point with Chinese officials.

Meeting the demand for visa interviews is only part of our resource challenge. We are likewise improving our issuance process, the time it takes to get approved visas into travelers’ hands. All nonimmigrant visa applicants worldwide now apply using our online form. Having application data in electronic format from the start allows us to instantly move that data throughout the process. We are developing a new generation of visa processing software that will automate additional procedures and help us further reduce our past reliance on paper.

We continue to work with our interagency partners to streamline security-related clearance processes, understanding that new processes can never compromise the level of scrutiny today’s world demands. In part, more efficient screening will help to minimize delays some legitimate travelers face because of false hits, caused by the unavoidable fact that the world is full of very common names. As we improve algorithms and increase the number of data elements used in name-based

screening, we will continue to reduce the number of cases delayed by these false name matches.

Eliminating some categories of applicants from the personal interview requirement would help cut wait times and staffing costs. Under INA sec. 222(h), the Secretary of State has the authority, subject to certain limitations, to waive the personal interview requirement on the basis of a U.S. national interest or if necessary because of unusual or emergent circumstances. We are considering whether there are limited categories of low-risk applicants from low-risk countries for which the Secretary might exercise her interview waiver authority without compromising the security or integrity of the visa process. This is a step forward we will take only with concurrence from our law enforcement partners and with your support.

The Bureau of Consular Affairs has studied the idea of conducting visa interviews by video link. While technologically possible, we concluded that a combination of security and productivity concerns make video interviews impractical in the field. The bottom line is that they cut rather than improve consular officer efficiency. In addition, a two-dimensional video does not provide the full sensory information gained from an in-person interview. Given the demands of our high-volume processing environment, security and budget constraints, other processing and automation initiatives represent better and more efficient uses of our resources.

As we consider each of these strategies to address higher visa demand, I can assure you that foremost in our minds is the need to maintain vigilance against travelers who want to do us harm. We have seen time and again that extremists will exploit any vulnerability. None of the provisions I am sharing with you have diminished in any way the security screening that is an essential part of the visa process. Some



actually improve the efficiency of our security procedures. We believe that security and travel facilitation are not mutually exclusive. Along with our interagency partners, we continue to seek solutions that maintain an appropriate level of caution while minimizing disruption and inconvenience for legitimate travelers.

### Appointment Wait Times

The steady increase in visa demand worldwide has resulted in longer wait times to obtain visa interviews at some of our posts. The Bureau of Consular Affairs has set a goal that wait times for an appointment should not exceed 30 days. In fact, around 90 percent of our posts currently have wait times of less than 20 days and 74 percent have wait times of less than seven days.

Unfortunately, in about ten percent of our posts, wait times still exceed 20 days and sometimes stretch longer than our 30-day target. This includes Brazil and some posts in China. We will continue to focus resources on these posts, but cannot immediately assign enough qualified adjudicating officers to bring down these wait times in the next few months.

Despite wait times, we have seen trade with and tourism from these countries surge ahead unchecked. In fact, the number of U.S. arrivals from countries with higher visa appointment wait times—Brazil, China, and India—boomed last year, and even grew at a rate faster than arrivals coming from most VWP countries. Moreover, U.S. exports to Brazil, China, and India also continue to climb. Assistant Secretary Jacobs has mandated that we develop a twenty-year plan to meet visa demand in China, Brazil and India. We are just completing our plan for

China with ambitious goals in staffing, facilities and other resources. We expect that, by continuing to streamline our visa processing systems, and by carefully allocating our resources, we will cut back on the wait times and continue to facilitate travel and trade in these countries.

All of our overseas posts have business facilitation programs or other procedures to expedite visa appointments for business travelers with legitimate needs for earlier dates. In addition, we give priority in scheduling appointments for student visa applicants, so they can get to the United States in time for the start of the semester.

As we work to transform our visa operations to meet an ever-growing demand for travel, the Bureau of Consular Affairs will continue to consult with the trade and business communities and the travel industry. We understand that foreign tourism and business are important economic engines. We recognize the value American business places on emerging markets such as in China and India. While in China last March, I met with American business leaders in Beijing and American Chamber of Commerce members in Guangzhou. Assistant Secretary Janice Jacobs has also recently visited our posts in Brazil, India, and China.

While much of our consular operation is primarily funded on the basis of fee-for-services, deep budget cuts could reduce the administrative platform overseas that supports visa operations and limit the options available to us in the future.

The Bureau of Consular Affairs will continue its commitment to meet the needs of international travel and trade to the extent possible. This is important not only to our nation's economy, but maintains America's reputation for openness, fostering exchange, and seeking mutual understanding.