



November 8, 2023

The Honorable Christopher Coons
Chair
U.S. Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on
State, Foreign Operations, & Related Programs
Room S-128, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Lindsey Graham
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on
State, Foreign Operations, & Related Programs
Room S-128, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mario Diaz-Balart
Chair
U.S. House Appropriations Subcommittee on
State, Foreign Operations, & Related Programs
Room H-307, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Barbara Lee
Ranking Member
U.S. House Appropriations Subcommittee on
State, Foreign Operations, & Related Programs
Room H-307, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chair Coons, Ranking Member Graham, Chair Diaz-Balart, and Ranking Member Lee:

On behalf of the Exhibitions & Conferences Alliance (ECA), a coalition of professional, trade, and labor organizations from across the face-to-face business events industry, thank you for your ongoing support for efforts to address visa processing backlogs at U.S. embassies and consulates around the world. As your Subcommittees continue work on the fiscal year (FY) 2024 State, Foreign Operations, & Related Programs Appropriations Act, **ECA encourages you to make investments that eliminate the long visa wait times that are harming American workers and businesses, including those in our industry.**

For background, U.S. exhibitions, conferences, and trade shows attract exhibitors, attendees, and buyers from around the world to conduct business. These events help drive domestic economic growth, support job creation, and empower U.S. small businesses all while advancing public and economic diplomacy. Prior to the pandemic, our industry's events supported 6.6 million U.S. jobs, added \$396 billion to gross domestic product, and hosted 1.7 million domestic and international exhibitors annually.

Unfortunately, the U.S. business events industry is still rebounding from the devastating economic impact of the pandemic. According to data from the Center for Exhibition Industry Research, our sector is still down 13.8% from 2019 levels, largely driven by our continued inability to fully welcome back international exhibitors, attendees, and buyers to our events in the U.S. This is primarily due to ongoing B-1/B-2 visa appointment wait time delays at many U.S. embassies and consulates around the world.

As of today, appointment wait times for B-1/B-2 visas still exceed 120 days at 76 U.S. embassies and consulates. Examples of posts with particularly long wait times that affect our industry include Abu Dhabi (405 days), Mumbai (470 days), Bogota (790 days), and Mexico City (851 days).

Because international exhibitors, attendees, and buyers must make significant financial outlays six to nine months in advance of events, the U.S. effectively remains closed for business to our stakeholders and customers in these key markets and many others; this continues to negatively impact our economic recovery and the ongoing recovery of those we serve, especially U.S. small businesses.

Within this context, ECA strongly supports including the following provisions in the final FY 2024 State, Foreign Operations, & Related Programs Appropriations Bill:

1. **\$300,000,000 to reduce passport backlogs and reduce visa wait times**, as included in H.R.4665 (pp.3-4):

Of the amounts deposited in the Consular and Border Security Programs account in this or any prior fiscal year pursuant to section 7069(e) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2022 (division K of Public Law 117–103), \$300,000,000 (increased by \$5,000,000) (reduced by \$5,000,000) shall be available until expended for the purposes of such account, including to reduce passport backlogs and reduce visa wait times: Provided, That the Secretary of State may by regulation authorize State officials or the United States Postal Service to collect and retain the execution fee for each application for a passport accepted by such officials or by that Service.

2. **Strong report language that increases ensures efficient visa processing going forward**, building on the following language from S.Rept.118-71 and H.Rept.118-146:

Not later than 90 days after the date of enactment of the act, the Secretary of State shall submit a report to the Committees on Appropriations detailing steps taken to address such backlogs, including new methods, processes, or technologies to reduce the delays in passport and visa operations. Such report shall also include average visa wait times globally, posts with the highest wait times, and address specific efforts CA is undertaking to reduce these wait times.

- S.Rept.118-71 (p.18)

The Secretary of State is directed to prioritize solutions to the passport and visa processing backlog, including by temporarily surging consular staffing requirements with other existing staff at the Department of State. Until passport and visa wait times return to average levels, which existed prior to the COVID–19 pandemic, the Secretary is directed to report to the Committees on Appropriations on a quarterly basis on any increases to staff by office and bureau with a justification as to why such staff would not be better utilized to address the passport and visa backlog.

- H.Rept.118-146 (p.14)

The Committee directs the Department of State to continue to proactively seek technological and procedural alternatives to streamline processes, where possible, to enhance consular services domestically and overseas. Not later than 60 days after the date of enactment of this Act, the Department of State shall brief the Committees on Appropriations on its plan to return to visa processing at full capacity at all embassies and consulates.

The Committee directs the Department of State to improve agency customer experience, particularly regarding passport and visa services for both American citizens and foreign nationals, respectively. The Committee further urges the Department to ensure that standards to measure and improve customer experience are in place and are incorporated into the performance plans required under 31 U.S.C. 1115.

- H.Rept.118-146 (p.14)

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The Honorable Lindsey Graham
The Honorable Mario Diaz-Balart
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Page 3

ECA and the entire business events industry thanks you for your continued attention to this critical issue that has harmed our industry since international travel restrictions to the U.S. were lifted in late 2021. As visitor visa appointment wait times continue to prevent the return of business visitors from many countries, a strong FY 2024 State, Foreign Operations, & Related Programs Appropriations Act is critical to our ability to fully bring back international exhibitors, attendees, and buyers to U.S. events as soon as possible.

If ECA can provide you with additional information and perspective on this important issue, please contact me by phone at (703) 672-0780 or email at tommy.goodwin@exhibitionsconferencesalliance.org. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. Goodwin', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Thomas F. (Tommy) Goodwin, FASAE, CAE, PMP, CMP
Vice President