



US Visa Processing Delays Called Worst Since 9/11

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August 3, 2022

Visitors to the United States, whether for business, education or leisure travel, are facing significant wait times for visas. Some international travelers are waiting six months to a year to schedule a visa interview, State Department data show.

The reason, said David Bier, associate director of immigration policy at the libertarian Cato Institute, is the two-year, pandemic-induced lockdown of U.S. consulates around the world that halted visa services.

“They just stopped doing work during COVID. And that produced what we're seeing now, which is year-plus waits, massive backlogs and all the problems associated with that,” he told VOA.

Though wait times vary significantly from consulate to consulate, Bier said, “it is the worst it's ever been since 9/11.”

Indeed, nearly two years after the 2001 terrorist attacks, a State Department official told a [House committee hearing on visa services](#) that “the vast majority of our cases are completed within three weeks.”

But nearly 2½ years after the pandemic began, according to a July [report by Bier](#), there is an “astounding eight-month wait to visit the United States for a period of at most just 90 days.”

“In July 2022, student visa interviews are backlogged 49 days — five times the wait pre-pandemic. Temporary work visas are backed up 75 days — up from 12. But the wait times apocalypse has come for tourists and business travelers: 247 days — up from just 17 before March 2020,” he wrote.

The latest State Department data from its consulates show the wait for some visa interviews can routinely be more than a year, and the majority of consulates now take more than six months to schedule an interview for a tourist or business traveler.

[For example](#), as of July 28, a tourist in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, can expect to wait 500 days for an interview; one in Bogota, Colombia, about 846 days.

The U.S. allows citizens of 40 countries to travel to the U.S. for business or tourism for stays of up to 90 days without visas. Citizens of all other countries must apply for visas. In general, the application begins by completing an online form on the State Department's website, paying a visa fee and scheduling an interview.

Impact

Jon Baselice, vice president of immigration policy at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, told VOA visa processing delays are disruptive for U.S. industries from tourism to seasonal work, or for potential business investors.

"Those delays have a negative impact on the ability of businesses to grow, expand their operations, generate new economic activity and create jobs for Americans," Baselice said.

In a February 2022 letter to the White House COVID-19 response coordinator, members of the U.S. Chamber Travel Coalition urged the Biden administration to ease domestic and international travel requirements and coordinate with other countries to ease travel between countries.

The coalition is made up of Airlines for America, the American Hotel & Lodging Association, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the U.S. Travel Association. It wrote that as other sectors of the economy reached a full recovery, business travel spending was about 50% below 2019 levels and international travel spending was down 78% compared with 2019.

Reducing wait times, backlog

A State Department spokesperson told VOA that visa interview wait times vary by country and depend on local conditions and demand. The wait time for a routine visa appointment at half of U.S. consulates "is less than four months, and at some posts is far shorter than that," the spokesperson said.

"The State Department is actively addressing consular staffing gaps created by the pandemic by onboarding and training new employees," the spokesperson said in an email.

The agency has doubled consular hiring in fiscal 2022 compared with fiscal 2021, the spokesperson said. "Newly trained employees are making their way to overseas consular adjudicator positions."

The additional employees are allowing the consulates to reduce the backlog, according to the State Department, which says the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in "profound" reductions in the department's visa processing capacity.

"Many of our embassies and consulates were at times only able to offer emergency services. Some of our embassies and consulates are still facing COVID-19-related restrictions, and many continue to face staffing challenges that began during the pandemic. However, U.S. visa services are open for business. Nearly all U.S. embassies and consulates have resumed full visa services," the spokesperson wrote.

But Bier said it was not enough.

"The last time visa wait times grew above a few months, then-President Obama ordered that 80 percent of all temporary visas be issued in less than 21 days. This executive order (and the knowledge that it was coming) promptly brought visa wait times down to a few days, but former President Trump rescinded the order, and President Biden has failed to reissue it. There is no reason to wait for this crisis to worsen," he wrote in his July report.

People are not coming to the United States, he said, unless they "really, really have to. I mean, we've made it such a burden."

"They have to start doing more remote interviewing. It would speed up the efficiency of the process if you didn't have to bring people into the consulate. ... That adds precious minutes to a process that needs to be coming along at twice the pace of what it currently is," he said.

In July 2019, 810,329 nonimmigrant visas were issued. In July 2020, that number shrank to 57,917. By July 2021, it had grown to 355,388.

Latest available data show that in June 2022 there were 722,962 nonimmigrant visas issued.

"We are committed to reducing those wait times as quickly as possible, recognizing the critical role international travel plays in the U.S. economy and the importance of family reunification," the State Department spokesperson said.