

# The Day

## Pandemic travel restrictions leave some Connecticut residents and natives stranded

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After Dutch-born interior designer Ingrid Bergman got the opportunity to open a sales network in North America, she decided to move to the U.S., choosing Norwich in 2017 for the ability to get a 7-hour flight back to the Netherlands from Boston or New York, lack of natural disasters, and cost of living.

But due to the combination of traveling to the Netherlands last March, COVID-19 travel restrictions and her visa status, she has found herself stranded abroad, unable to return home.

"Sometimes you have days you feel miserable and you feel depressed, because you live in a limbo land," she said via Zoom. She went to the Netherlands last year to finalize her divorce, and because she is a noncitizen and didn't qualify for an exception, she couldn't return.

On a page titled "**Travelers Prohibited from Entry to the United States**," the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention notes, "With specific exceptions, several Presidential proclamations suspend and limit entry into the United States, as immigrants or nonimmigrants, of noncitizens who were physically present within the following countries during the 14-day period preceding their entry or attempted entry into the United States."

Included is the European Schengen area, which encompasses 29 countries, city-states and republics, of which the Netherlands is one. Also on the list is China, Iran, United Kingdom, Republic of Ireland, Brazil, South Africa and India.

Asked at a **July 15 news conference** with German Chancellor Angela Merkel about ending restrictions on Europeans, President Joe Biden said a team was considering how soon to lift the ban "and I will be able to answer that question to you within the next several days." That didn't happen.

**On July 26**, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said, given rising cases due to the delta variant of the coronavirus, restrictions would continue.

Bergman, who said she is fully vaccinated, could get around the restrictions by traveling to another country for two weeks, but she doesn't feel safe with the coronavirus situation in some other countries and would have to pay for a hotel. She had been staying with her parents, but now is staying with her new boyfriend. She voiced confusion as to why Americans can travel to Europe but certain Europeans can't return to America, and others have **critiqued the restrictions** for not making sense.

She has been leasing a building in Essex since late 2019 to open a design house, but it's still empty. She said the furniture, fabrics, lighting, accessories and more are ready to ship, but without being there, she can't open the showroom to the public and clients.

Bergman requested a waiver of **Presidential Proclamation 10143**, but the U.S. Consulate General Amsterdam responded that her purpose of travel "did not meet the narrow scope of national interest exceptions available to this Proclamation and the request has been denied."

This was referring to a proclamation Biden issued Jan. 25, which extended travel restrictions and added South Africa. This undid an order President Donald Trump signed Jan. 18 that would have lifted the restrictions he previously imposed, except on China and Iran.

Biden's proclamation doesn't apply to lawful permanent residents of the U.S.; any noncitizen who is married to, the parent of or the child of a U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident; noncitizens traveling as air or sea crew and noncitizens serving in the U.S. Armed Forces.

It allowed the secretary of state to determine national interest exceptions, which includes students with F-1 or M-1 visas traveling to start or continue an academic program.

Biden's proclamation exempts many other types of visas, but not Bergman's E-2 visa. Her 5-year investor visa is scheduled to expire in November 2022.

Bergman said of people in her situation, "We are residents of the United States, and we are doing our best to support the American economy. If I wasn't believing in that, I would've just stayed in the Netherlands."

### **Families divided by border**

Since 2010, Waterford native Megan Boettcher has been living in Vancouver, where she teaches college physics. She last visited Waterford in January 2020, when her father died, and she returned to Canada at the same time flights from China started being shut down.

Boettcher was worried about her mother being without her father, after they had been married for more than 50 years, and now she had more to worry about.

She and her brother made Stop & Shop accounts to order food for their mother, and she communicated with the Waterford Public Library for services.

When it came to travel restrictions, Boettcher said one of the most confusing things was that individual Canadian provinces sometimes had different rules from Canada on the whole, sometimes contradicting each other.

Boettcher said because she's a U.S. citizen, she could have shown up at the border by foot or car at any point and been let in. But during much of the pandemic, she would have had to quarantine

in an "exorbitantly expensive" hotel, and she and her mother were concerned about the coronavirus risk. She said for awhile, Canada wouldn't have let her back in.

"A lot of people have this idea that there's a set of rules and the rules are clear-cut," Boettcher said. But she said even when traveling between very developed countries, "you are at the whim of the specific human who is interpreting your situation in that moment."

Shannon Unwin has been in the opposite situation: The Canadian native, whose husband is from Montville, lives in East Lyme but all her family is in Canada.

"It's been horrible," she said with a sad laugh. "It's been absolutely horrible."

Unwin was last in Canada for her grandmother's funeral in February 2020. She said her family is very close, and before the pandemic they visited each other often. She is from Quebec.

She said she could go up to Canada because she's a Canadian citizen, but her husband and son wouldn't be able to come. She said to be able to cross, she would have to get a negative coronavirus test result, quarantine for three days in a hotel and then quarantine for seven days at her final destination.

Unwin considered going on her own. A computer tech working in health care, she said her employer would have mandated a two-week quarantine upon her return, and "that's like a month without working, so it wasn't feasible."

She said her parents couldn't cross the border to come down because they're not considered essential. But she said the restrictions are changing in August, and she and her son will be able to cross with a negative coronavirus test and not quarantine.

**New rules** that go into effect Monday allow fully vaccinated U.S. citizens to enter Canada for nonessential reasons, if certain criteria are met. While Unwin's son is too young to be vaccinated, the measure allows unvaccinated children under 12 to travel with fully vaccinated parents or guardians, and such children are exempt from quarantine.

### **How businesses are impacted**

In a **July 13 opinion piece** in the New York Daily News, Ryan Bourne and David Bier of the libertarian Cato Institute pointed to the economic implications of restricting travel of visa holders, noting, "Many multinational companies will not invest in U.S. enterprises if they cannot be assured that their people will be there to oversee the projects."

Is this an issue for businesses in Connecticut?

Chris DiPentima, president of the Connecticut Business & Industry Association, said this isn't among CBIA's top three concerns about labor participation; the top three are unemployment subsidies, concerns about health and lack of child care. He said the lack of international workers would be the fourth issue.

He said the average company size in Connecticut is smaller than in most states, and so he doesn't think this is a prevalent issue for most companies.

DiPentima said the only company he has heard from about this is TRUMPF Inc. Its North American headquarters is in Farmington but it's a subsidiary of a German company, and DiPentima said workers may travel between Germany and Connecticut.

TRUMPF Inc. Senior Vice President Burke Doar said before the pandemic, there may have been the opportunity for a colleague abroad to work here on, say, a three-year assignment. He said that workers are still able to travel to Connecticut under the national interest exception, but "it just is more burdensome; it's a more cumbersome process."

Doar explained that TRUMPF builds "million-dollar machine tools that enable (companies) like John Deere to make their equipment."

He said the pandemic has impacted the ability of customers to come to Connecticut to view the machines in demonstration centers. TRUMPF has made do with virtual demonstrations using different camera angles, but he said the chance for people to feel the tangible product enhances the ability of the company to be successful.