



American Society of
Travel Advisors

September 20, 2022

House Energy and Commerce Committee
2125 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Pallone, Ranking Member McMorris Rodgers and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the American Society of Travel Advisors (ASTA) and the more than 160,000 travel advisors across the country we represent, I write to submit the following into the record for the House Committee Energy & Commerce's full committee markup on September 21, 2022.

As you consider different measures during the markup, ASTA urges support for H.R. 6965, the Visit America Act, introduced by Reps. Dina Titus (D-NV), Ed Case (D-HI), and the late Don Young (R-AK). The Senate version of H.R. 6965, introduced by Sen. Sullivan (R-AK), was incorporated into the Omnibus Travel and Tourism Act (S. 3375) which advanced out of the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee in December 2021.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, government restrictions on and guidance against travel issued by an array of federal agencies highlight the scattered nature of federal oversight of the travel industry. Contending with various agencies and ever-changing rules while struggling to keep their businesses alive put unnecessary and avoidable hardships on travel advisors during an already stressful time.

To address the chorus of regulatory and legislative authority among federal agencies, the bipartisan Visit America Act establishes an Assistant Secretary of Travel and Tourism position within the U.S. Department of Commerce to provide high-level leadership, accountable to Congress, to work effectively across federal agencies to develop and implement national strategies and policies that grow travel. The U.S. is the only G20 country without a federal agency or cabinet-level official in charge of tourism policy and establishing an Assistant Secretary would put the U.S. on par with its top competitors for tourism and provide a high-level official to work with our partners across the world on travel issues. The bill would also require Commerce to develop and implement a COVID-19 public health emergency recovery strategy to assist the U.S. travel and tourism industry to quickly recover from the pandemic.

By way of background, travel agencies – online, “brick and mortar” and many hybrid business models in between – play a central role in the U.S. travel and tourism industry. Travel agencies sell the majority of airline tickets in the U.S. – over 640,000 air tickets per day in the United States in July 2022 – as well as two-thirds of cruises and 68 percent of tour packages.

According to the latest data from the U.S. Census Bureau, there are nearly 15,000 retail travel agency locations in the U.S. employing over 108,000 people, plus an additional 60,000 self-employed travel advisors. The vast majority of these businesses (98 percent) are small according to the Small Business Administration's size standards, and over two-thirds of them are owned and operated by women.

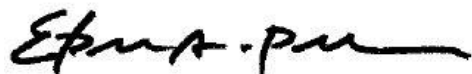
As a result of the coronavirus pandemic and the governmental response to it, these businesses (and any revenue associated with them) came to an almost complete halt in March of 2020 and remained there for more than two years. Since then, we have seen a succession of viral variants and complex, ever-changing government restrictions on and warnings against travel. As a result, the travel sector's recovery has been painfully slow.

Government action – here and abroad – played a key role in this catastrophe and while public health is paramount in addressing this crisis, we believe governments have a responsibility to provide some level of support to those harmed by the steps they've taken in response to COVID-19. The many government restrictions travel advisors had to contend with while struggling to keep their businesses alive since March 2020 include the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) rule requiring a negative COVID test for those entering the country by air, the European Union's ban on inbound American travelers, a series of CDC actions intended to discourage cruise travel, as well as longstanding guidance from the CDC, the State Department, some state governments against international travel of any kind, the Department of Transportation, and Commerce.

For the travel industry during the pandemic, travel restrictions from multiple agencies and oversight were all over the map. Creating a high-level leadership position within the federal government focused on industry concerns would protect the industry from unnecessary setback due to conflicting and confusing policy decisions. The bill would also require Commerce to develop and implement a COVID-19 public health emergency recovery strategy to assist the U.S. travel and tourism industry to quickly recover from the pandemic. ASTA asks that the Committee act in the same fashion as its Senate counterpart and move forward with H.R. 6965 to provide the industry with the protection and preparation it sorely needs.

If you or your staff has any questions about this or any issue related to the travel industry, don't hesitate to contact me or Jessica Klement, ASTA VP of Advocacy, at jklement@asta.org. Thank you for considering ASTA's views on this critical matter.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eben Peck". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Eben Peck
Executive Vice President, Advocacy