



American Society of
Travel Advisors

June 9, 2020

The Honorable Robert R. Redfield,
Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
395 E Street SW
Washington, DC 20024

Dear Director Redfield:

I am writing on behalf of the American Society of Travel Advisors (ASTA) and the more than 140,000 Americans who work at travel agencies across the country to urge you to make restoring consumer confidence in the domestic and international travel system a top priority in the coming weeks and months.

As you are aware, the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis has had a catastrophic impact on the U.S. travel industry. Based on our member surveys, the travel agency community expects to lose at least \$7.7 billion in revenue this year, with the industry contracting by more than 50 percent. Further, more than half of U.S. travel agencies expect to go out of business by September if current conditions hold. For the travel industry as a whole, according to the U.S Travel Association, the unemployment rate stands at 51 percent, twice the nationwide high at the peak of the Great Depression, and travel-related job losses represent 38 percent of all job losses through April – more than 8 million jobs.

For the livelihood of these Americans, their families, their clients and the traveling public, it is critical that the travel industry rebound as quickly as possible. We recognize that, given the scale of the pandemic, a return to normalcy will be a slow and deliberate process, heavily influenced by government policy both here and abroad. A key aspect of this rebound, perhaps the central one, is the need for assurances from public health officials that it is safe for consumers to travel again. Our research indicates this message from the government will outweigh any other messages – from travel suppliers, from government officials outside public health departments, even from friends and family in influencing consumer confidence. For the federal government, this means the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) must have a central role in formulating specific guidelines for travel in the near future.

To date, the CDC's communications with regard to travel has been uneven at best – very specific on cruise travel (see the Center's "No Sail Order" issued in March and renewed in April) but less so on other travel modes. In the absence of clear communication, the entire population remains essentially in the dark, left to rely on a patchwork of regional, state and local pronouncements to inform their decision making with respect to travel. Airlines, hoteliers, cruise lines, tour operators, car rental companies, insurance providers and others are similarly left to their own devices as to when to restart operations in the face of an unprecedented global pandemic. This uncertainty is, unquestionably, inhibiting the pace of the revival of the travel industry, a goal we know you share.

As such, we strongly urge the CDC to tackle this challenge in coordination with other federal agencies in the coming weeks and months toward the following goals:

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- **Setting Clear Standards Across All Travel Modes** – Work with the appropriate federal agencies as well as state and local health departments to set clear standards for each of the main travel modes – including but not limited to aviation, cruise, hotel and lodging, car rental and tour operators. In essence, we ask the Administration to tell suppliers in each vertical what steps they need to take, by when, to restart travel safely. Doing so, we believe, will supercharge the nascent travel recovery by allowing suppliers, agencies and consumers to plan and book with confidence.
- **Prioritize the Restart of the Cruise Industry** – As discussed above, CDC’s posture toward cruising has been the most clear as compared to other modes. However, this clarity must extend to setting clear and achievable safety standards across the industry, accompanied by specific timelines, so that this part of the travel industry – which has been all but shut down by CDC’s actions – can get back on its feet.
- **Prioritize Resumption of Passport Processing** – Passport processing operations – limited to life-and-death emergencies since mid-March – may be a small part of the process of restarting travel, but it is a critical and central one – indeed it is the foundation of Americans’ long-cherished ability to travel abroad. As such, while we recognize the many challenges COVID-19 poses to the State Department, we urge you to work with State to make the restoration of normal passport processing operations a priority as the Administration works toward the safe resumption of international travel.
- **Prioritize Resumption of International Travel** – Today, for understandable reasons, virtually every country on the planet has some sort of travel restriction in place. While some are starting to loosen and some regions or country pairs are exploring the concept of “travel bubbles” where restrictions wouldn’t apply, untangling this situation will take many months and much diplomatic energy. While restarting domestic travel in earnest will likely be the primary focus in the early stages of recovery, we urge the Administration to focus the diplomatic assets of the U.S. government toward working with governments across the globe to restore a free flow of travel across borders, subject of course to appropriate health, safety and security measures, which is critical to global economic health.

At ASTA, we are committed to working toward a travel industry restart with federal, state and international governments, our members, and the broader travel ecosystem in a way that puts the safety and health of U.S. citizens at its center. Taken together with the financial relief provided to travel businesses by the U.S. Congress and the private sector doing its part, we believe the steps outlined above will help instill consumer confidence and get America’s economy, and its intrepid travelers, moving again.

Thank you, on behalf of our 14,000-strong membership, for considering ASTA’s views on this critical matter. If you or your staff has any questions about this or any related to the travel industry, don’t hesitate to contact me or Eben Peck, ASTA’s Executive Vice President of Advocacy, at (703) 739-6842 or epeck@asta.org.

Yours Sincerely,



Zane Kerby
President and Chief Executive Officer