

# Update on Worldwide Visa Operations

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## Worldwide Visa Operations Are Recovering Faster than Expected from the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Department of State is successfully lowering visa interview wait times worldwide, following closures during the pandemic. We've doubled our hiring of U.S. Foreign Service personnel to do this important work, we are recovering faster than projected, and this year we will reach pre-pandemic processing levels.

### Backlogs and Wait Times – How We Got Here

As for many service providers, the COVID-19 pandemic forced profound reductions in the Department's visa processing capacity in two main ways. First, restrictions on travel to the United States, and local restrictions on public places like our overseas consular waiting rooms, curbed our ability to see visa applicants. As most applicants are required by U.S. law to appear in person, these restrictions forced a reduction in the number of visa applications the Department could process.

Second, as revenue from the application fees that fund visa processing operations was cut nearly in half, the Department was forced to leave more than 300 overseas consular officer positions unfilled in 2020 and 2021. This further reduced the number of visa applications we could process.

### Where We Are Now

Since COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted, we are back in business worldwide. Ninety-six percent of our embassies and consulates are again interviewing visa applicants, and we are processing nonimmigrant visa applications at 94 percent of pre-pandemic monthly averages and immigrant visa applications at 130 percent. In the past 12 months (through September 30, 2022), we processed 8 million non-immigrant visas, well above our best-case projections. We are well on the way to meeting and exceeding pre-pandemic visa processing capacity.

## Improved efficiency through Interview Waivers

During the pandemic, the Department of State coordinated with the Department of Homeland Security to waive in-person interviews for several key visa categories, including for many students and temporary workers integral to supply chains. In addition, applicants renewing nonimmigrant visas in the same classification within 48 months of their prior visa's expiration are now eligible to apply without an in-person interview in their country of nationality or residence. This has already reduced the wait time for an interview appointment at many embassies and consulates. We estimate 30 percent of worldwide nonimmigrant visa applicants may be eligible for an interview waiver, freeing up in-person interview appointments for those applicants who still require an in-person interview.

## Building on Success

Our focused efforts during the pandemic recovery period have yielded substantial results in facilitating travel to the United States. Here are just some of our successes in the last year:

- We reduced the immigrant visa (IV) backlog and reunited families: As of October 2022, our consular sections worldwide have reduced the overall IV interview scheduling backlog by 25 percent (nearly 135,000 applicants), from its peak in July 2021. Our embassies in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras eliminated an IV backlog of 22,000 applicants, and our consulate in Ciudad Juarez reduced the IV backlog for Mexican applicants by nearly 44 percent.
- We set records for student and academic exchange visitor visas. Consular sections worldwide adjudicated more student visas in July 2022 than in any other month since 2016, with nearly 180,000 F, M, and academic J visas processed.
- We exceeded pre-pandemic levels of visa processing for seasonal agricultural and nonagricultural workers who are vital links in the nation's food supply chain and help ease labor shortages and inflation, with more than 395,000 H-2 visas issued in fiscal year 2022.

- We issued thousands of crewmember visas essential for maintaining the global supply chains that support both the U.S. and global economy. By Summer 2022, the issuance rates of crewmember visas were comparable to pre-pandemic levels.
- We issued all available E-3 visas in FY 2022, the immigrant visa category most sought by healthcare workers, who are crucial to the health and wellbeing of our communities.
- We issued 54,334 Diversity Visas during the DV-2022 program year. That is the highest number of DVs issued in 25 years, and all available DV numbers were exhausted when that total was combined with the domestic adjustments of status approved by USCIS under the DV program.

### **For Those Navigating Long Interview Wait Times**

Our goal is to provide a visa interview for every applicant who requires one, worldwide, in a reasonable timeframe. Although our processing capacity is rebounding faster than projected, we know that visa applicants still face lengthy wait times at some embassies and consulates. We urge any visa applicant who can travel to another embassy or consulate with shorter wait times to consider doing so. There is no penalty for applying anywhere appointments are available, even outside your home country. For the latest information about wait times, see <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas.html>.