

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-1904

November 8, 2021

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

The Honorable Wendy R. Sherman
Deputy Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken and Deputy Secretary Sherman:

I write to request an update on efforts the Department of State is undertaking to address the ongoing closures and limited hours of American consulates around the world, which is contributing to the significant backlog of pending visa interview requests.

My constituents in Maine continue to raise their concerns about the inability to secure visas overseas due to the full or partial closures of our consulates. These constituents include small businesses that rely on temporary workers, colleges and universities who hope to welcome back international students, religious organizations, as well as hospitals working to secure visas for health care workers to address Maine's current workforce crisis. This will become especially urgent in the coming months as businesses attempt to secure H-2B visas for additional workers needed during the 2022 tourism season.

Based on one public analysis of available data, as of mid-October, 60 percent of consulates remained fully or partially closed to non-emergency appointments for nonimmigrant visa applicants, while 40 percent are completely closed to non-emergency, nonimmigrant visa appointments. These types of visas cover temporary workers, students, tourists, and many others. The open consulates are reporting wait times of, in many cases, six months or longer for some nonimmigrant visas. For immigrant visa applicants, the State Department recently reported a backlog of 494,566 applicants who had completed their documentation but were waiting for a visa appointment (eight times the backlog reported by the Department in 2019).

I appreciate the challenges posed by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, including the fact that in many cases the State Department must follow host nation guidance and restrictions which are out of the control of U.S. policymakers. Since May, however, the State Department has made vaccinations available to our entire overseas consular workforce, helping to protect the safety of consular staff.

I request an update from the State Department on actions it is taking to fully open U.S. embassies and consulates, to include consultations with host nation governments, as well as efforts the Department is undertaking to address the ongoing backlog of visa interviews. I

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believe the State Department can support the needs of American citizens and employers while mitigating the risks posed by the pandemic.

Thank you, and I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Susan M. Collins". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "M".

Susan M. Collins
United States Senator