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Lt. Gov. Kevin Meyer
State of Alaska, *EX OFFICIO*



February 10, 2021

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
United States Senate
522 Hart Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Dan Sullivan
United States Senate
302 Hart Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Don Young
United States House of Representatives
2314 Rayburn House Office Bldg.
Washington, DC 20515

Senators Murkowski and Sullivan, and Congressman Young,

On behalf of the Alaska Travel Industry Association (ATIA) – the leading statewide organization for travel and tourism in Alaska – we send our continued appreciation for your leadership and support. Thank you especially for your remarks made to our membership during the Virtual ATIA Industry Event & Trade Show on January 18th.

One concern to emerge from our gathering is regarding the J-1 Student Visa program administered by the US Department of State. Thanks to your ongoing efforts in support of our industry, Alaska is anticipating many travelers who are planning vacations to the 49th State in 2022.

In a pre-pandemic year, the seasonal Alaskan workforce has included about 2,000 J-1 Student Visa holders from overseas who come to work primarily in our tourism sector. In key visitor destinations like Seward, Talkeetna, and Denali Park, the impact of these workers is compounded through the multiple positions they often fill: a housekeeper during the day may work in a restaurant in the evenings to increase their income.

In the summer of 2021, the Anchorage Daily News reported just 10% of our normal J-1 workforce was in the state. US Travel reports a continued bottleneck persists and is pandemic-related in the origin countries of visa applicants.

In several countries, US Embassies and Consulate offices are limiting in-person access for public health reasons. The effect is many visa applicants are not able to schedule in-person interviews, a requirement for completion of the visa application process.

Given new and effective mitigations in place for curbing and controlling the spread of COVID and variants, **ATIA is asking for your assistance in advocating to the State Department for the safe re-opening of our embassies and consulates or to allow an interview waiver for summer work travel, to enable the J-1 Visa application process to continue again unfettered.** In addition, we ask for your assistance with any advocacy efforts to encourage open embassies in other countries, such as Bulgaria and Romania, to facilitate the processing of J1 student applicants. Without a solution to this current application backlog, there is a real risk to our tourism industry recovery in Alaska just as we see signs pointing to positive visitor numbers in the coming months.

Our industry is reliant on a fully engaged and often seasonal workforce, much like our partners in the seafood sector in Alaska, where the more commonly used H-2B worker visa also requires in-person interviews. Reopening our foreign offices will assist in the recovery of combined Alaska tourism and fishing industry economic output of nearly \$10 billion in pre-pandemic years.

Businesses are adapting their operations to allow for safe and effective commerce to occur. ATIA is working with in-state and Lower 48 partners to recruit a domestic workforce, but we need your help in opening the important foreign workforce pipeline. Thank you for your efforts to continue to support the recovery of Alaska's visitor industry businesses.

Sincerely,



Sarah Leonard
ATIA President & CEO



Scott Habberstad, Alaska Airlines
Chair, ATIA Board of Directors