



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

STATEMENT

OF

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BEFORE THE

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT
AND INVESTIGATIONS**

HEARING ON

**REPATRIATIONS AND IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON STATE DEPARTMENT
CONSULAR PROGRAMS**

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Chairman Castro, Ranking Member Zeldin, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am extraordinarily proud to be here today, representing not only the Office of Overseas Citizens Services, OCS, here in Washington, but the consular officers worldwide who assist U.S. citizens every day under often extraordinarily challenging circumstances. I assure you, you will not find a more dedicated team of public servants anywhere. Since the first news of a novel virus outbreak in Hubei, China, OCS has been at the center of an intensive, around the clock effort to inform U.S. travelers of the risks related to COVID and to bring home those who were caught overseas when the pandemic prompted widespread border closures and curtailment of commercial airline services.

The global consular team's work during the COVID outbreak is giving Congress and the American public an opportunity to see in large scale the very broad range of actions OCS and consular officers in the field take every day to support U.S. citizen travelers and those living overseas. Although the COVID pandemic is unprecedented in its scope and impact, we are not new to the business of repatriating citizens in need, we are not new to the business of communicating accurate, actionable, life-saving advice to citizens. Protecting the health and safety of U.S. citizens while they are abroad and helping them get home when they are in need has always been my office's core mission.

PDAS Brownlee has described the truly extraordinary efforts the Department's Task Force undertook to expand our capacity to offer support to our citizens overseas, and OCS is deeply grateful for the way in which the entire Department mobilized during this crisis. OCS staff comprised the core Task Force staffing, and as the Task Force stands down I pledge to you

and the citizens we serve that OCS continues to monitor the provision of services to American citizens at posts worldwide and will continue to support repatriation and evacuation efforts where needed. Within my office, we have dedicated desk officers assigned to cover every country in the world. These officers are thoroughly versed in local country conditions, in constant touch with their American Citizens Services colleagues at Embassies and Consulates overseas, and likewise in contact with regional bureau desk officers here at State. They provide policy and logistical crisis management guidance with the legal support of our attorneys whenever and wherever needed, around the clock. More broadly, OCS maintains close contact with the Bureau of Medical Services, the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs and other Bureaus, as well as interagency partners that comprised the COVID Task Force. With a fully cross-trained staff, we are prepared to flex as needed to support any renewed demand for repatriations, and we will further call on the larger Bureau of Consular Affairs to bolster us as needed.

These same country officers maintain the Consular Information Program that is the foundation of our efforts to protect U.S. citizens. Our products include Travel Advisories, Country Information pages, and timely alerts issued directly by our embassies and consulates. These products provide U.S. citizens with fact-based information designed to enable travelers and those who live overseas to make well-informed decisions regarding their personal safety. Our Travel Advisories in particular have become invaluable not just to private citizens, but also to professionals in the travel, insurance, and private security sectors. The Travel Advisory system assigns each country an advice level ranging from 1 (exercise normal precautions), to 4

(do not travel) derived from metrics-based rubrics that assess crime, terrorism, kidnapping, hostage-taking, civil unrest, natural disaster, health and other risk.

The COVID-19 pandemic poses unprecedented health and logistical risks for travelers, and we are working closely with public health experts at the U.S. Centers for Disease control to insure that our destination-specific Travel Advisories take into account the latest data on the state of the pandemic in each country worldwide. In tandem with CDC, OCS issued an unprecedented Level 4 (do not travel) global Travel Advisory in March. With conditions improving in some countries, we are now following CDC's lead and returning to our previous system of country-specific levels of travel advice. Our desk officers will work closely with CDC and consular officers in the field to continually assess and update information as needed, both through Travel Advisories but also by means of timely health and safety Alerts.

As much as I hope we are never again confronted with a crisis requiring us to repatriate over 100,000 U.S. citizens, we are ready to do so if needed. In fact, we are already working on how we would do it better. Rethinking and innovating in the face of challenges is critically important, and we are currently engaged in a lessons learned effort to identify action items that will enhance our responsiveness.

One line of effort involves closer coordination with the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs to identify means to rapidly engage commercial carriers to run flights into areas where regular routes have been curtailed. The Department's model has long involved securing charter flights, but we believe that direct-pay options that leverage established carriers' payment,

reservations, and manifesting systems will facilitate a more streamlined experience for U.S. citizens. During the recent crisis, the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs and colleagues at the Department of Transportation collaborated to establish commercial repatriation partnerships, while our diplomats and their contacts overseas used their good offices to secure host country waivers for such flights. We are now working to codify and improve these processes so that we can employ them again when needed.

Throughout the COVID crisis, the Department has relied on our longstanding Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) to provide timely updates to registered travelers. STEP got the job done, but we believe it is time to modernize the system to leverage more current methods of reaching U.S. citizens using social media. Currently, we are working with our digital outreach and public diplomacy offices to conduct focus groups and surveys on how Americans get and use travel information, including how they use our information products and communication tools. We are also conducting a comprehensive review of lessons learned from our experience messaging to the public during our push to repatriate Americans during the COVID pandemic. As we take stock of and learn from our experiences communicating with the public, we will modernize our products and tools in ways that both maintain their integrity and quality and improve their attractiveness and accessibility.

I know this committee is aware that most of the State Department's consular operations are funded by fee collections this year because most visa fees must be set at the cost of providing visa services, it is difficult to rely solely on these fees to cover the costs of safeguarding U.S. citizens overseas. The government took prudent steps this year to control the spread of the

coronavirus and many potential travelers postponed applying for U.S. visas. As a result, consular fee revenues are falling sharply this year. In order to ensure the Department's ability to carry out our core mandate to assist U.S. citizens in distress even when visa revenues are falling, we ask to work with you on language transmitted through the FY 2021 Budget to ensure a sustainable funding approach for Overseas Citizen Services, particularly for those services for which CA must rely on other fees in order to provide.

We have just celebrated our country's 244th year of independence. And we did so at a time when Americans are facing unprecedented challenges. Across our country, we are seeing our citizens rise to these challenges with courage and resourcefulness. Our office has the privilege of safeguarding the safety and security of our fellow citizens overseas and no other work at the State Department is more important. I'm proud to lead a team of foreign affairs professionals that serve our country and fellow citizens incredibly well.

We remain committed to protecting the health and welfare of U.S. citizens overseas and are actively working with foreign governments and international partners to achieve this goal in this crisis.

I reiterate my thanks to the Chairman and Ranking Member for this opportunity to address you. I look forward to answering your questions and those of other members of the Subcommittee.

