

BY THE WAY (A PSA)

WHAT ADVISORS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ASTA'S VISIT TO WASHINGTON

Behind ASTA's efforts to help U.S. travel and tourism rebound from the pandemic.

WORDS / RUTH TERRY



From mask mandates to testing requirements, the past few years have shown how deeply government policies impact travel and tourism.

The American Society of Travel Advisors (ASTA) represents 2,600 travel advisors and vendors nationwide. Undoubtedly, ASTA members felt financial pain as guidelines and restrictions were implemented across the travel industry during the pandemic. According to recent ASTA member surveys, the average travel agency's revenue was down 71% in 2021 compared to 2019.

"Congress and the administration make decisions and pass laws that affect travel

advisors of all kinds — as well as the products they sell to their clients — every day, whether they realize it or not," says Jessica Klement, vice president, advocacy at ASTA. "The most effective way to have a say in the legislative process is to take grassroots action."

With this goal in mind, the organization hosts Legislative Day each year where travel advisors get a crash course in grassroots advocacy. They then use what they learn to speak to legislators directly the following day.

On June 22, 2022, more than 225 attendees from over 40 states arrived on Capitol Hill to advocate directly for policies that could help travel agencies. Their efforts

resulted in 16 new bipartisan cosponsors for two bills; Klement anticipates even more when Congress is back in session.

CONSISTENT CAMPAIGNING LED TO CHANGE

One of ASTA's goals was to petition lawmakers to remove the COVID-19 testing requirement for inbound international travelers (Ultimately, the Biden Administration reversed the testing requirement less than two weeks before this year's Legislative Day).

In December 2021, the CDC tightened the existing Global Testing Order to require all international travelers, regardless of citizenship



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or vaccination status, to take a COVID test 24 hours before departure. When other countries rolled back testing requirements in time for spring breaks and summer travel, the existing requirement put the U.S. at a disadvantage. For Americans, the order presented logistical challenges in finding testing centers abroad and an additional cost burden. It was also the “last key U.S. travel restriction” hindering the reopening of the travel industry, according to ASTA.

ASTA campaigned against inbound testing, organizing “over 100 congressional meetings, 4,000 grassroots emails to the administration, over 7,400 letters to the editor through our grassroots portal and multiple ASTA and coalition letters to administration officials,” says Klement. “The constant drumbeat, along with sound policy arguments, led to the requirement’s elimination.”

“When it comes to the government, you face a choice – engage in the process or put your

head in the sand,” says ASTA president and CEO Zane Kerby.

OTHER LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES BENEFITING ADVISORS

One of ASTA’s goals for the 2022 Legislative Day was to focus on the importance of restoring the Employee Retention Tax Credit (ERTC) of up to \$7,000 per employee per quarter for small businesses. This is important as the majority of travel agencies are small businesses.

“It was supposed to run through the end of 2021, but the bipartisan infrastructure bill signed into law in November rescinded the credit one quarter early to pay for the legislation,” explains Klement. “Travel agencies were counting on the ERTC to help them get through the fourth quarter of 2021. Losing the credit in the middle of the quarter stopped the recovery process in its tracks.”

The organization also lobbied for the Visit

America Act, introduced by Senator Dan Sullivan, R-AK, on May 27 and rolled into a larger Senate bill, which would establish a comprehensive plan to “address the declining percentage of international visitors to the United States.” Amid the pandemic, the number of international arrivals to the U.S. fell from 80 million in 2019 to 21.1 million in 2021, according to a report from the U.S. Department of Commerce.

“Policymaking is a marathon, not a sprint,” says Eben Peck, ASTA’s executive vice president of advocacy. “Our goal was to raise awareness about our industry and how COVID restrictions have impacted us and secure support from legislators for policies that will help our members’ businesses recover. Legislative Day is the most impactful thing our members can do to help make that happen.”

Save the date: Next year’s Legislative Day takes place June 20-21, 2023.