

Suspended Services: U.S. Embassy and Consulates During Pandemic

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The pandemic brought on by COVID-19 has changed much of the way the U.S. government responds to requests and applications. This is very true at the U.S. Department of State's diplomatic posts (embassy and consulates) in Canada. This article will report on the suspension of U.S. services in Canada for non-immigrant visa applicants — specifically for E visa applicants-immigrant visa applicants and for those who are seeking U.S. citizenship services.

For Canadians, the E visa is a five-year visa, the longest temporary non-immigrant visa available, and it is for certain employees and owners of companies that are Canadian owned and either maintain substantial Canadian investment or substantial trade in goods or services. This visa has enjoyed great popularity in the past 10 years due to facilitation and speedy adjudication times. The dedicated team at the U.S. Consulate in Toronto has reflected an understanding that trade and investment are good for the United States and should be facilitated.

On March 20, 2020, the U.S. Consulate suspended interviews for E visa applicants. Though applicants have been permitted to schedule appointments, the appointments have repeatedly been pushed back and rescheduled. Since an interview is a mandatory step for first-time applicants and most repeat applicants, this has ground the process to a halt, with the exception of any who have been able to make a case for emergency processing. Hopefully, interviews will begin as scheduled later this month.

Similarly, immigrant visa interviews have been suspended. In April, President Donald Trump suspended issuance of most immigrant visas, and that suspension has been extended until the end of the year. The notable exceptions to the suspension are for spouses of U.S. citizens, and cases where the delay will result in a loss of eligibility within the designated class (for example, children who will age-out of eligibility if their green card application is not processed in a timely manner). However, even those who continue to qualify, who had, or were awaiting scheduled interviews continue to await word on interview dates, with no indication when immigrant visa services will resume for eligible individuals and families.

Another service that lies specifically within the purview of the U.S. Department of State is loss of U.S. citizenship. For over a decade, U.S. citizens living abroad have seen their tax filing obligations highlighted in the news and social media. This attention has resulted in many of them deciding to obtain certificates confirming their loss of (U.S.) nationality through renunciation or relinquishment. The timing of the interviews required for this process is important for tax filing purposes. U.S. citizens who requested interviews in 2020, and some in 2019, continue to await interview dates.

Other important U.S. citizenship services such as obtaining U.S. passports or Consular Reports of Birth Abroad have

been stalled, with reports of a potential restart sometime in August. No appointments can be made yet — limiting the time frame and/or purpose of entry for many U.S. citizens who lack proof of citizenship.

The pandemic has wreaked havoc for so many in so many ways, including along the U.S.-Canadian border. A return to processing benefits requests at the U.S. embassies and consulates throughout Canada will move North America closer to normalizing its activities and help economies on both sides of the border to recover faster, together. The many beneficiaries of consular and U.S. citizenship services look forward to the ability to schedule appointments, or notices that such appointments have been scheduled.

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