

The Detroit News

POLITICS

'It feels like we're invisible': One year of U.S.-Canada border closure

Melissa Nann Burke The Detroit News

Published 11:02 p.m. ET Mar. 30, 2021 | Updated 7:46 a.m. ET Mar. 31, 2021

A year into the closure of the U.S.-Canadian border, Michigan's binational couples and families separated from one another are chafing for a timeline and protocols for reopening the international boundary as vaccinations to COVID-19 become more widespread.

They are urging the U.S. government, at minimum, to grant exemptions for family members and unmarried couples to cross the land border after a year of missed birthdays, holidays and hugs. Americans with property in Canada are also seeking exceptions.

But after 12 months of uncertainty, Michigan residents say they feel like they're shouting into a void.

"It is so incredibly frustrating because it feels like we have been screaming and begging and pleading and writing letters and everything you can think of," said Karissa Baker, 30, of River Rouge, whose fiancé Jake Temple lives across the Detroit River in Windsor.

"Nobody will tell us anything. They won't tell us what they're planning or even if there is a plan. It feels like we're invisible."

When the border closed last March to all but "essential" travel, Baker and Temple thought it would only last a few months. But officials continued renewing the closure by 30 days, month after month. The current order is through April 21.

The pair, who have been together for nearly three years, live about 20 minutes apart by car, but they've only seen one another once over the last year.

Their story is a common one among the group Let Us Reunite, with more than 2,100 families on both sides of the border pressing the United States to make travel exemptions for family members.

"Frankly, even just an acknowledgment that families are suffering is something that will go a long way with the members in our group," said Devon Weber, a New Yorker living in Quebec who founded the Let Us Reunite campaign.

"You can't make a plan for your future when the border closure just rolls over every month. And the White House doesn't even acknowledge the pain that that's causing these families."

Congress wants plan

As vaccinations ramp up, President Joe Biden has shared his goal for the country to be on a path to normalcy by summer. For people along the northern border, a semblance of normalcy means being able to travel in Canada again.

Bipartisan members of Congress in northern border states are increasingly leaning on the administration to disclose its criteria for the current protocols and a plan for safely easing restrictions at the border. In the interim, they want officials to grant exemptions for people separated from their loved ones or property.

"The reality here is the U.S.-Canadian relationship took a hit over last four years, and in particularly the last 12 months," said U.S. Rep. Brian Higgins, a New York Democrat who co-chairs the Northern Border Caucus, referring to the Trump administration's relations with Canada.

The lawmakers in his caucus have noted states and provinces in the U.S. and Canada developed frameworks for reopening based on public health metrics and other criteria. They want the two nations to collaborate and do the same.

U.S. Rep. Lisa McClain, R-Bruce Township, recounted the "devastating" story of a constituent whose mother died of a heart attack but wasn't allowed to cross the border for her funeral.

"We've made so many strides as it pertains to COVID in terms of keeping people safe and beginning to get vaccinated. We've got to start getting into talks and negotiations. How do we do this safely?" McClain said. "It's like they're not even talking about it."

Asked last week about plans for issuing reopening guidelines for the border, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said she didn't have anything to preview.

"It's constantly, of course, reevaluated. We look at it through the prism of COVID and safety and, obviously, diplomatic relationships, too," Psaki said at a press briefing. "But I don't have anything to predict for you on that front."

Rep. Brenda Lawrence, D-Southfield, said she's spoken with the White House about the issue, noting it's going to be harder to justify severe border restrictions for people who have been vaccinated against the virus.

"I'm pushing them to give an exception — if they've had the vaccine, let them go home and see their loved ones," Lawrence said. "What we've been told is they are considering normalization (for the border) for mid-May when vaccines are expected to be widely available across North America.

"But there has been no formal announcement, so the uncertainty continues to burden these binational national families and border communities."

U.S. Sen. Gary Peters, the Democratic chair of the Senate Homeland Security panel, said he has discussed the issue with Canadian officials, as well as officials within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and with Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.

"I will just say that it is under constant review, and it's certainly my hope that we can get back to normal as quickly as possible and as safely as possible," the Bloomfield Township Democrat said.

Quarantine hurdle

Unlike the U.S., Canada last year allowed for categories of immediate and extended family members and long-term partners of Canadians and permanent residents to enter Canada.

But those individuals must abide by strict health protocols, including a mandatory 14-day quarantine in isolation. The quarantine requirement even applies to people who have tested negative for COVID or who have been vaccinated.

River Rouge's Baker would qualify to enter Canada under the exemptions. But like many others, she said she can't afford to take two weeks off from work for the quarantine period, and doesn't have child care for her 4-year-old son.

The restrictions at the land border are not enforced for air travel. Temple, 29, said he finally made the trek to Michigan by air for Valentine's Day at a total cost of \$1,000. That was after driving four hours to Toronto twice: One trip to get tested for COVID-19 at a private lab to be able to fly, and the second for the flight from Toronto to Detroit.

"It's not something we can do on a regular basis," said Temple, a financial adviser.

Baker noted the health risk of a flight — passing through two international airports and encountering dozens of other people — is far greater than Temple driving by himself, while masked, across the Ambassador Bridge, which costs \$12.

"There should be something for families to reunite and to be able to see each other without having to jump through a dozen hoops," Temple said. "We're not saying that it should be open to all vacation and travelers, or it should be open for people to shop at Target.

"At this point, it's been well over a year, and we still have very little traction."

Families separated

Canadian Devon Wargo, a nurse and permanent resident of the United States, lives in Grosse Pointe Woods, which is a 45-minute drive from her family in Kingsville, Ontario.

Her parents used to drive to Michigan often to help her with child care, but that can no longer happen with the COVID restrictions. Wargo's children, ages 4 and 6, haven't seen their Canadian family members in more than a year.

The exception is Devon Wargo's mother, who flew in from Toronto in November to help her during the holidays, Wargo said.

"It's heartbreaking. Especially with my parents being a little bit up there in age. Luckily, nothing had gone on where they had been ill and wouldn't have been able to see their grandkids," she said.

She could take her kids into Canada to visit, but that would entail missing school and work for two weeks before they even get out of quarantine. "It's just not doable," she said.

"Everybody doesn't mind making sacrifices. Of course, I don't, and I have for 13 months," Wargo said. "But now I think is the time that, with the vaccine and everything rolling out, there should be some exemptions for family at the U.S. land border at this point."

Anthony Essa, 45, of Gibraltar was hoping to see his Canadian fiancée, Michelle Bondy, 44, for Valentine's Day after they'd only had one visit together last year. She lives 45 minutes away in Amherstburg, Ontario, but was going to have to fly in through Toronto.

The journey got more expensive after Canada required this winter that international air travelers quarantine on arrival for three nights in a government-authorized hotel that must be prepaid. The couple scrapped the trip over mounting cost concerns.

"She has her own house," Essa said. "She shouldn't have to stay in some hotel."

"We don't know when we will see each other again," Bondy said, noting their wedding plans are also on hold until the border restrictions are eased. "We have to wait."

Michigan residents who own vacation homes in Canada also have been prevented from crossing over to use them for the last year. Now, they face a second season with little or no access or ability to retrieve belongings.

Some argue they should be allowed to travel by car directly to their property to quarantine there, with little transmission risk or contact with others.

Matt Cullen's family has had a property on Lake Huron near Sarnia for about 17 years, about an hour's drive from his home in Grosse Pointe, he said.

Cullen's family used to visit once or twice a month year-round, he said, but now it's been 15 or 16 months since they've been able to go, all while paying taxes and maintenance costs from afar.

"We're lucky enough to have good friends and neighbors over there. They kinda have been looking after it for us," said Cullen, the chairman of the gaming company Jack Entertainment.

"It's unfortunate. Obviously, it pales compared to families that have been split up and so on through this. But it's still a challenging circumstance, for sure."

He heard there were ways to get around the system and go but never explored them.

"It just became clear that even if you found a way to go, it was trying to get around the rules a little bit, right? And that didn't feel like it was the right either," Cullen said.

"You just kind of conclude after a while that that's what it is, and you got to deal with it. But it's tough."

Canadian 'vax' lag

It's unclear when border restrictions might be loosened or lifted, or what health records or credentials might be required to cross.

The European Union is planning to roll out a digital "vaccine passport," or certificate, by summer for travelers who are vaccinated. And the Biden administration is reportedly at work

on an initiative that would allow Americans to show proof of vaccination as businesses reopen.

Peters said it's too early to speculate about what a reopened U.S.-Canadian border might look like.

"Right now, the United States is ahead of Canada in terms of vaccination rates and in terms of the number of people vaccinated to date," he said. "The Canadians are in the process of increasing their capacity and that's, well, that's all a work in progress, clearly."

And Canadian officials have yet to signal readiness to budge on border measures.

U.S. Rep. Bill Huizenga said he's raised the issue with Canadian legislators in his role on the Canada-United States Inter-Parliamentary Group, highlighting the lack of a plan on both sides of the border.

"What I brought up with my Canadian counterparts is, when are we going to deem this as safe — or safe enough — with vaccines and testing and all the other things, to allow people to get back and forth for more than just essential business travel?" said Huizenga, a Holland Republican.

Businesses that rely on cross-border tourism have been hard hit, in addition to residents separated from family or property, he noted.

"This is a binational, bilateral issue and concern. Especially for those of us in border states, we are getting pinched," he said.

Huizenga and his wife, Natalie, are among those "Can-Am" families feeling the pinch. She is originally from the Toronto area and hasn't visited her parents, who are in their 80s, for months.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in late February on NBC's "Meet the Press" that COVID case counts, hospitalization rates and the presence of variants are among the factors his government is reviewing in deciding to hold in place the border restrictions.

"We'll continue to engage with the White House and with the administration on the best times to start releasing border measures," Trudeau said. "But, for now, we all need to keep safe, and that means keeping them in place."

When the border closed a year ago, Americans were viewed as COVID super-spreaders. Now, the United States has fully vaccinated 16% of its population, while Canada has administered

two doses of the vaccine to 1.66% of its people, according to government data.

Higgins of New York said the situation presents an opportunity for officials from both nations to expand by Memorial Day the categories of essential travelers to include people who have property across the border or are separated from loved ones.

"More pressure needs to be brought to bear on the Biden administration to get this thing right," said Higgins, whose district includes the border cities of Buffalo and Niagara Falls.

"Like anything else, you're competing with other issues, so that's why I think it's important to just be very, very persistent, which a lot of members have been."

Nobody's suggesting that vaccinations mean the end of mask-wearing or other COVID precautions, he said, but reuniting families or allowing people to visit their vacation property is low risk.

"There's a lot of collateral damage from this, beyond the obvious, and it has to do with mental health issues, chronic loneliness, isolation and all those other issues. To just not speak to that is inhumane," Higgins said.

"We need metrics, and people need something optimistic in their lives."

mburke@detroitnews.com