



A CAMPAIGN FOR FAMILY REUNIFICATION ACROSS THE NORTHERN BORDER

To: Biden-Harris Transition; Department of Homeland Security review team

From: Let Us Reunite

Re: Family travel exemptions across the U.S./Canada land border

INTRODUCTION

Let Us Reunite is a volunteer-led campaign asking the United States Government for compassionate travel exemptions to allow for families to reunify via the land border between the US and Canada. Founded in October 2020, our membership represents nearly 1,500 Americans and Canadian families who have been separated from their loved ones because of the March 21, 2020 border closure between the US and Canada. These couples, parents and children, grandparents, adult child caregivers to their elderly parents each have a story that speaks of the loss that comes with separation, the physical and mental toll that happens, and the hope for eventual reunification. (See Appendix A)

BACKGROUND

When the US-Canadian land border closed at 11:59 pm on March 20, 2020¹, life changed drastically for those with spouses, parents, committed partners, and children of both sides of the border. Only U.S. citizens, dual citizens, permanent residents, and those considered essential were allowed to cross.

On June 8, 2020 the Canadian government announced an executive action, creating travel exemptions that allow for the reunification of immediate family members. The United States Government did not reciprocate. On October 2, 2020, the Canadian government amended its travel exemptions to allow for the reunification of extended family members and on compassionate grounds. Again, the United States Government did not reciprocate. (See Appendix B)

While air travel from Canada into the United States is not restricted, the cost of tickets is prohibitive for many families. The health risks associated with air travel means that high-risk individuals such as the elderly and the immunocompromised cannot fly. Border families who live less than an hour apart now face expensive travel nightmares with multiple connections that can take longer than 10 hours. (See Appendix C)

¹<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/03/24/2020-06217/notification-of-temporary-travel-restrictions-applicable-to-land-ports-of-entry-and-ferries-service>

REUNIFYING FAMILIES AT THE US/CANADIAN BORDER

We ask that on day one, President Biden issue an executive order directing the Department of Homeland Security to put into a policy of compassionate family travel exemptions across the US-Canadian land border, allowing for immediate family reunification. Additionally, this should align with the Canadian family reunification policy.²

Any family travel exemptions enacted should be in line with state or any potential federal COVID-19 health and quarantine procedures. These exemptions should not come at the expense of public health; Canadians reuniting with their American family must be held to any current federal, state and local health restrictions. This shows a commitment toward stopping the spread of COVID-19 while acknowledging the physical, mental and emotional toll that people face when separated from their loved ones.

Since March 20, the border closure has been extended each month, with no dialogue or plan for reopening the border. We believe reciprocal family travel exemptions are an important first step in the framework to reopening the border. Mirroring the Canadian exemptions will send a strong signal to Canada that the United States is willing to work on a safe, science-based plan to reopen the border.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

While Let Us Reunite urges the President-elect to make the compassionate family travel exemptions a reality, we are cognizant that there is much to learn from the process instituted by Canada to carry out their extended family travel exemptions. Under this onerous process, each foreign national and Canadian family member must complete a form, containing an affidavit which is signed by the sponsoring Canadian family member and notarized. The form is then sent to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), and authorized on a case-by-case basis, within 14 days business days.

The launch of the travel exemption program was not smooth, with the majority of authorizations occurring outside the 14-day period. Many authorizations have been rejected due to missing documentation that was never requested, and some applicants were never notified that their authorization was approved or denied. There is no tracking system for applicants to check their application status, and the IRCC openly has discouraged applicants from following up on their application.

Let Us Reunite asks that the President's executive order mandates four characteristics of the process for compassionate family travel exemptions:

1. Immediate family members granted instant access to crossing the US/Canadian land border with proper documentation of familial ties
2. A simple, streamlined process with easy to understand instructions for extended family
3. A transparent process with the ability for follow-up and track progress
4. That Customs and Border Patrol staff have sufficient training to effectively enact this process, including but not limited to accepting whatever proof of relationship DHS deems appropriate to prove familial ties

² The Canadian family reunification policy provides a compassionate exemption to the border closure to allow for family reunification for those who:

- are married;
- are parents;
- have been in an exclusive dating relationship, for at least one year and have spent time in the physical presence of that person at some point during the relationship;
- are a non-dependent child (adult child);
- are a grandchild (dependent child of a non-dependent adult child);
- are a sibling, half-sibling or step-sibling; or
- a grandparent of a US Citizen or Green Card holder.