



April 7, 2021

Mr. Jeffrey Zients  
COVID-19 Recovery Team Coordinator  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave., NW  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. Zients:

On behalf of the 14,000 members of the American Society of Travel Advisors (ASTA), and more than 160,000 travel advisor professionals, I write today to respectfully request clarification on the status of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) [Framework for Conditional Sailing Order \(CSO\)](#).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, most travel agencies in this country (98 percent) are small businesses according to the U.S. Small Business Administration's (SBA) size standards, and over two-thirds are women owned. At last count, there were close to 15,000 retail locations in the U.S., employing over 108,000 people, plus an additional 60,000 self-employed travel advisors working as independent contractors. As of 2019, they collectively accounted for an annual payroll output of \$5.5 billion and annual revenues of \$17.7 billion.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the governmental response to it, the travel agency business has come to an almost complete halt and has remained there since March 2020. According to ASTA member surveys, average travel agency's business income was down 82 percent in 2020 as compared to 2019. Even factoring in the relief programs created by the federal CARES Act and successor legislation, the average travel agency has had to layoff close to 60 percent of its staff. Government action – both here and abroad – has played a key role in this catastrophe. Financial support for the travel industry has been uneven so far, especially with regard to less visible sectors of the industry like travel agencies.



While it did not equate to the immediate resumption of cruise line operations, the CDC's replacement of its 'No-Sail Order' with a [framework for a phased resumption of cruise ship](#) operations last October was anticipated to be a welcome development and a key milestone in the restart of the travel industry. At the time of the announcement of the CSO, there was no vaccine widely available, and COVID-19 infection and death rates were far greater than they are now. **Despite these very encouraging developments, however, to date the CDC has yet to establish the conditions to permit cruising to safely resume.**

The effect of the CDC's inaction with respect to the travel industry has been devastating. Travel advisors directly support 86,360 cruise line jobs in the U.S. and more than 700,000 jobs in the travel sector as a whole. The CDC's continued delay in implementing the framework to remove restrictions on cruise travel imperils livelihoods and communities in South Florida, up to now the *de facto* cruise capital of the world, and other port cities across the country.

The inconsistency of the CDC's position on sailing is apparent, as it was able to lift testing and quarantine requirements for vaccinated persons traveling domestically but failed to issue similar guidance for cruisers without any rationale. We also question why the CDC issued the CSO in the first place when it seemingly has no interest in establishing the conditions – or even a timeframe for establishing the conditions – that would permit cruising to resume. All of this leaves travelers and their travel advisors with no ability to plan or travel with any certainty.

Moreover, unlike many other forms of travel, cruising is a voluntary experience, and the travelers onboard cruise ships are people who want to be there. Our consumer research indicates that Americans are anxious to return to the seas, with almost 70 percent of cruisers indicating they are ready to cruise again right now.

**As such, we strongly urge you to work with the CDC to expeditiously implement rules to permit cruise ship operations to safely resume with the following specific goals in mind:**

- **Set Clear Standards and Timelines** – Work with the CDC to set clear standards for cruising. In essence, we ask the Administration to tell cruise lines and travel advisors what steps they need to take, by when, to restart cruising safely. Doing so, we believe, will supercharge the nascent travel recovery by allowing suppliers, agencies, and consumers to plan and book with confidence.



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- **Prioritize the Restart of the Cruise Industry** – As discussed above, we ask for clarity. This must extend to setting clear and achievable safety standards across the industry, accompanied by specific timelines, so that this part of the travel industry – which has been all but shut down by CDC's actions – can get back on its feet.
- **Publish a Framework for Travel's Reopening** – We call on the Administration to publish a framework for travel's reopening so advisors and their clients can plan with certainty and to continue work on systems to establish vaccination, immunity, or a negative test result so that cruise travel can restart in earnest.

At ASTA, we are committed to working toward a travel industry restart with federal, state, and international governments, our members, and the broader travel ecosystem in a way that puts the safety and health of U.S. citizens at its center. Taken together with the financial relief provided to travel businesses by the U.S. Congress and the private sector doing its part, we believe the steps outlined above will help instill consumer confidence and get America's economy, and its intrepid travelers, moving again.

Thank you, on behalf of our 14,000-strong membership, for considering ASTA's views on this critical matter. If you or your staff have any questions about this or any questions related to the travel industry, don't hesitate to contact me or Eben Peck, ASTA's Executive Vice President of Advocacy, at (703) 739-6842 or [epeck@asta.org](mailto:epeck@asta.org).

Yours Sincerely,

Zane Kerby  
President & Chief Executive Officer