

**SCI - INBOUND VISA TOOLKIT**

**Overview**

To make the daunting visa process more understandable, the following document breaks down different visas that are needed to enter the United States and how to apply.

**Visa Resources and the Role of Sister Cities International in the Visa Process**

As an organization Sister Cities International is unable to process visas directly through the Department of State. However, there are several resources that Sister Cities International offers that can help answer questions and educate members on the process of attaining visas for inbound and outbound travelers.

 Online Inbound Visa Toolkit (this Toolkit) which includes:

- Inbound passport and visa application process

- Visa Types for inbound travelers

- Important links and resources for visa questions

- Necessary Forms

Sister Cities International staff resources:

If you have any questions or cannot find information on a particular aspect of the visa application process, please do not hesitate to contact the DC office at (202)347-8630 or by email at info@sistercities.org.

J-1 High School Visa program:

A partnership with American Cultural Exchange Service to help U.S. students in the sister cities network to get their J-1 visa for one year or semester of study in a public high school in one of their sister cities. More information can be found at <https://www.exploretheworld.org/> or contact info@sistercities.org for more information.

Letters of Invitation

For programs organized by the DC office, Sister Cities International can write letters of invitation for inbound visitors to help with the application process. For programs run by local sister city associations, letters of invitation must be written by the official responsible for the event. Sister Cities International can write letters of support for the exchange but a local letter will also be necessary.

**Background Information on Visas and Visa Waivers**

The following information was compiled to present a more simplified outline of the visa process for entering the United States and the documentation and fees required for obtaining a visa.

**What are Visas?**

A visa allows you to enter the United States as far as the port of entry (airport or land border crossing). Only the immigration officer has the authority to permit you to enter the United States. He or she decides how long you can stay for any visit. Immigration matters are the responsibility of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The list of relevant visas for sister city members are included in this section.

**How long does it take to get a visa?**

Some visa applications require additional administrative processing, which requires some additional time. Most administrative processing is resolved within 60 days of application. When administrative processing is required, the timing will vary based on individual circumstances including types of visas and which part of the world the US State Department Embassy interview occurs. The US State Department has placed on their website a list of Embassy waits times for interviews. Please check with the State Department website at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas.html> for the most up to date information regarding visas and embassy appointment wait times.

In general, inquiries about status of administrative processing, applicants or their representatives are asked to wait at least 90 days from the date of interview or submission of supplemental documents, whichever is later.

**Do I have to have a visa to travel to the US?**

Not in all cases. The Visa Waiver Program (VWP) enables nationals of certain countries to travel to the United States for tourism or business for stays of 90 days or less without obtaining a visa. The program was established in 1986 with the objective of eliminating unnecessary barriers to travel, stimulating the tourism industry, and permitting the Department of State to focus consular resources in other areas. VWP eligible travelers may apply for a visa, if they prefer to do so. Not all countries participate in the VWP, and not all travelers from VWP countries are eligible to use the program. Check the State Department website at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/visa-information-resources/visas-news-archive/20080801_dhs-announces-implementation-of-the-electronic-system-for-travel.html> for the most current information on the VWP program.

Be sure to apply as early in advance as you can with all of the appropriate documents readily available.

Before leaving, be sure to check with the American Consulate or Embassy to see if this policy has changed and if you will need additional documentation. The United States government reserves the right to withdraw this permit at any time, if it feels that you will likely work without a permit or overstay your 90 day visitation limit.

You can also read the FAQ's on the State Department website regarding visas at: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/visa-information-resources/frequently-asked-questions/about-basics.html>

**For Countries NOT in the Visa Waiver Program**

For all the countries not in the Visa Waiver Program it is most likely a visa is needed for entry. Visas and fees are based on your visa type, with the most common being the tourist visa. The cost for this visa is $160.00. For information on all U.S. Visa types and their fees, visit <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/visa-information-resources/fees/fees-visa-services.html>

**The Visa Application Process**

Since 9/11 the Department of State has increased the amount of paperwork and regulations that foreign nationals must go through to obtain visas. The process does differ depending on the visa that one needs. The process can be quite subjective depending on the visa type. The Consulates have full authority to approve or deny a visa at the interviewing process. It is important for the person applying for the visa to have all necessary documentations in place to help this process along.

Below is an outline of the necessary information and procedures needed for successfully obtaining the appropriate visa.

**Note on the DS-156 form:** The Online DS-160 application form has replaced the DS-156 form for most Visas. Please see the most current information at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/visa-information-resources/forms/ds-160-online-nonimmigrant-visa-application/ds-160-faqs.html>

**For a B-1 Business Visa or B-2 Pleasure Visa**

Commonly known as the “visa for temporary visitors for business or pleasure”. You may apply for either a B-1 (Business) or a B-2 (pleasure) visa, but if the travel is not specific enough (as judged by the consulate), you will receive a B-1/B-2 visa.

Applicants need to collect the following information:

• Online Visa Application, Form DS-160.

• Current, valid passport or travel document

• Photograph (2 x 2 inches, passport type. See the internet address below.)

• Evidence of funds to cover expenses in the United States such as credit card statements

• Evidence of permanent residence abroad (bills, family relationships, work information)

Contact the closest local US embassy to schedule an interview and to receive your visa. The contact information for your embassy can be found at <http://www.usembassy.gov/>. Make sure you have all the required information listed above and check with the embassy if any other information is needed.

A complete list of other visa types can be found at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/visa-information-resources/fees/fees-visa-services.html#temp>.

**The Interview Process**

During the application process for every visa, the embassy interview is the very important. Remember, it is up to the interviewee to prove that he or she is not a flight risk or a danger to the United States. The Consular officer needs to feel comfortable that the interviewee will not cause harm to the U.S. and will return to his or her country of origin upon completion of the schedule as outlined in the visa.

The following are a list of tips to having a successful interview:

1. The interview must be with a consulate official at an American Embassy or a U.S. Consulate in the visitor’s home country.

a. Nearest embassies can be found at <http://www.usembassy.gov/>.

2. Prepare early for arranging the interview. Many embassies will not take interviews more than 120 days before the visa is to become active. With that in mind, it is essential that the interview is done well in advance of leaving for the US.

3. Make sure that the forms that require SEVIS fees or employer or school official signatures (I-20, DS-2019, I-129) are in hand well before the interview.

4. At the interview, BRING ALL RELEVANT DOCUMENTS. The officer may not look at these, but it is important that they are readily available for inspection.

**Application Fees**

There are several costs that go along with the application process. The following are the current fees, but they are subject to change based on the local embassy and new visa policies.

**General fees** (All are in USD amounts)

DS-160 Visa Application, paid to the Department of State: $160.00

Any extension of a visa or transfer of visa status to another type, paid to the Department of State: $246.00

**Visa-specific fees**

SEVIS fee (for J-1, Q-1, F-1, and M-1 visas), paid online: $180.00

Sponsoring organization (such as ACS) fee: Varied depending on program. Usually ranges from $3,000.00 to $7,500.00.