



SOCIETY OF INFECTIOUS
DISEASES PHARMACISTS

December 20, 2021

President Joseph R. Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C 20500

Dear President Biden,

We write to thank you for your science-driven leadership of our nation's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and **to urge you to repeal the travel ban on southern African countries**. Since the first day of your Administration, we have been proud to support your COVID-19 response policies on a wide range of issues including vaccination requirements, investments in our public health infrastructure and health equity, because those policies have been rooted in scientific evidence. While we understand the inclination to impose a travel ban when the Omicron variant was first reported by South Africa, we now know that Omicron is already in the United States and is reported by the World Health Organization to be in at least 76 countries. The current travel ban will not control spread of the variant and could likely cause unintentional harm to the global COVID-19 response and threaten future pandemic responses. This rapidly evolving pandemic calls for nimble policy decisions that follow the best available evidence.

The Omicron variant has already been detected in a majority of U.S. states and European countries making it difficult to justify a ban on travel only from a small number of affected countries. At least one report from Minnesota revealed that Omicron was present in a symptomatic individual in the U.S. even prior to the announcement of Omicron in South Africa.¹ As of December 13, it is estimated that up to 10% of infections in certain jurisdictions of Connecticut and up to 20% of samples from jurisdictions in Washington State represent the Omicron variant. The CDC estimates

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2021/s1202-additional-omicron.html>

that 3% of all US infections were Omicron by December 11th, with an exponential growth detected in all reporting jurisdictions.²

Travel bans that apply to a limited number of countries are not particularly effective at preventing transmission in a global pandemic, particularly once the virus has already spread beyond those countries. The ban on travelers from China early in the COVID-19 pandemic at best only slightly delayed COVID-19 from reaching the U.S., in part because travel from other countries and within the U.S. was still unrestricted and researchers found multiple introductions from Europe.³ Similarly, scientific reviews of travel bans and influenza have found that such policies have very limited utility in preventing transmission.⁴

We are deeply concerned about the potential for unintended negative consequences of the current travel ban because it provides a false sense of security and discourages leaders of other countries from disclosing timely information when they detect new variants of SARS-CoV-2 or other emerging infectious diseases due to fear of US travel bans. International collaboration and sharing of scientific information across countries is essential to ending this pandemic and effectively preparing for and responding to future health crises. We greatly appreciate the steps you have already taken to strengthen U.S. global health leadership and to support the global COVID-19 response and urge you to repeal the current travel ban so it does not undermine the strength of your efforts.

Travel bans that are applied in a disparate fashion can engender stigma against groups of people or countries that are likely undermine collective efforts necessary to stem the pandemic. We already experienced increases in hate crimes against individuals of Asian heritage in the US, and we greatly appreciate your enactment of the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act and your Administration's broader leadership to combat racism and promote health equity.

While we share your concerns about the Omicron variant's high transmissibility and potential to severely overwhelm our health care facilities, it is important to focus on the strategies that we know are effective to protect our communities and save lives—many of which are already underway. We continue to loudly echo your call that all eligible individuals get vaccinated and get boosters, and we strongly urge you to redouble efforts to promote global vaccine equity. Worldwide vaccination is crucial to end the cycle of new variants driving new surges in infections. Even against Omicron, the vaccines offer a high level of protection against severe disease, hospitalization and death. Testing, vaccination and masking requirements for travelers are all important and effective ways to limit spread. Universal mask wearing in indoor settings, regardless of vaccination status, should be implemented. Testing capacity should be further expanded. These layered prevention strategies have demonstrated effectiveness when fully executed.

Our country's response to the HIV pandemic taught us many lessons that have helped to strengthen our response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We appeal to you to learn from the unintended and long-lasting harms caused by the 22-year ban on people with HIV traveling to the U.S. and lift the current travel ban on Southern African countries.

Once again, we thank you for your steadfast leadership. We urge you to repeal the current travel ban, and we remain at your, our nation's and our world's service as we continue to work toward

² <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#variant-proportions>

³ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32471856/>

⁴ <https://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/92/12/14-135590.pdf>

ending the COVID-19 pandemic the only way we can—by following the science and working together.

Sincerely,



Daniel P. McQuillen,
MD, FIDSA
President, IDSA



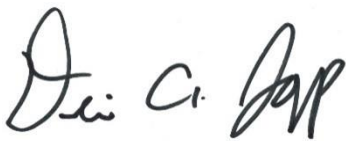
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