



March 9, 2026

The Hon. Kriselda Valderrama
Chair, House Economic Matters Committee
230 Taylor House Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Chairwoman Valderrama:

On behalf of the American Society of Travel Advisors (ASTA) and the more than 4,900 travel advisors in the state of Maryland, I am writing to express our concerns with House Bill (HB) 994, which would impose new regulatory burdens on travel advisors in Maryland and across the country. I respectfully request that this letter be made part of the record of the committee's March 11, 2026, hearing on the legislation.

ASTA is the world's leading professional travel trade organization, representing more than 310,000 travel advisors across the country. Travel agencies – online, “brick and mortar” and many hybrid business models in between – play a critical role in the broader travel and tourism economy. Ninety-five percent of travel agencies are small businesses and 80% of them are women-owned. Our membership ranges from home-based businesses and traditional storefront agencies to the largest travel management companies and online travel agencies.

Before diving into the specifics of the legislation, allow me to express my condolences to the Wurie family as they continue to feel the tremendous pain of losing their beloved Isatu and Alieu. This loss, occurring while on such a holy pilgrimage, is a tragedy no family should face. We truly wish their loved ones peace and comfort, and we were disheartened to learn that the negligence of a tour operator may have contributed to this tragedy.

As the world's largest association of travel professionals, we share the committee's commitment to protecting consumers from travel scams and unethical conduct. ASTA members adhere to a comprehensive Code of Ethics, and we encourage travelers to report suspected fraud or misconduct to our Consumer Affairs department. Through certifications like our Verified Travel Advisor program, members pursue ongoing ethics and business training. Because one bad actor can damage the entire profession, ASTA is committed to ensuring consumers choose a travel advisor they can trust.

HB 994 would create a seller of travel registration program and impose other new requirements on travel agencies in the state and across the country. Under the proposed legislation, starting on October 1, 2026, any travel agency that resides in Maryland or solicits business from a Maryland resident must register with the state at a cost of \$300 per year and provide a list of agents or

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employees affiliated with the agency. They must also provide proof of professional liability and errors and omissions insurance in the amount of at least \$1 million.

While we endorse efforts to weed out unscrupulous individuals masquerading as *bona fide* travel agents, we question the justification for additional regulation. We are concerned about the regulatory burden and cost associated with adding another state registration requirement to the list of those that already exist today, as it would be especially burdensome on small agencies that do business in multiple states. Moreover, because travel advisors are not constrained by state lines, this regulation would undoubtedly be confusing, if not unintentionally overlooked, by travel professionals who only occasionally sell to Maryland residents but live outside the state.

As previously mentioned, all ASTA members are subject to a strict code of ethics. We strongly encourage consumers to do their homework to find the right travel professional, and we provide the ability for consumers to connect with our Verified Travel Advisors without worrying about being the subject of an unfortunate scam.

We appreciate that this legislation is well-intended and stand ready to protect anyone affected by the actions of incompetent or unscrupulous travel agencies and tour operators. However, we are concerned the proposed legislation does not strike the right balance between protecting consumers and minimizing regulatory burdens on professional, ethical travel advisors and agencies in Maryland and across the country. ASTA and its members would welcome the opportunity to work with the committee to craft a bill that is fair to both consumers and travel advisors, but we respectfully request that you delay consideration of HB 994 – or similar legislation – until the appropriate balance can be struck.

Thank you for considering our views on this critical issue. If you or your staff have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Laura Vogel, Director of Advocacy, at lvogel@asta.org or 703-739-8701. Further, should you be interested in speaking directly with travel advisors in Maryland, we would be happy to connect you.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Zane Kerby", is written over a light blue circular background.

Zane Kerby
President and Chief Executive Officer

CC: The Hon. Adrian Boafo
The Hon. Marvin Holmes
The Hon. Kym Taylor

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