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For Immediate Release

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TTCSI Calls Upon the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to Reconsider Proposed Adjustment to US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Fees

A proposed change to regulations governing US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Fees could see persons wishing to work in the United States having to pay anywhere from 33% to 137% increased fees for special permits and visas to do so. The fees hike has enormous implications for high-skilled and cultural and creative workers in Trinidad and Tobago, as well as in the Caribbean at large.

There has been a chorus of voices across the region calling on the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to halt its proposed adjustment to these fees, with the Trinidad and Tobago Coalition of Services Industries (TTCSI), the national umbrella body for services associations in T&T, being the latest to denounce the move, and calling on the US-DHS to reconsider.

Under the proposed rule, applications from employers seeking to sponsor immigrants for permanent US residency or temporary work visas would need to be filed with an additional US\$600 fee, to fund the USCIS asylum program. High-skilled workers—many of them in the technology sector—would see a fee jump by 70% to US\$780 for H-1B visas. They also would need to pay US\$215 in pre-registration fees, up from the current US\$10 fee. Fees for requests to sponsor temporary agricultural and non-agricultural workers would jump above US\$1,000—increases of 137% and 135% from the current levels, respectively.

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The TTCSI is concerned the adoption of the proposed regulations will increase the cost of doing business for all stakeholders involved and have a negative impact on a wide range of services sector industries locally and regionally.

The Coalition notes that following a review done by the USCIS, its costs have increased considerably, with the institution stating it cannot maintain adequate service levels because of budget cuts and its current level of spending without lasting impacts on operations.

Like our regional counterparts, we at TTCSI strongly believe the timing of the proposed increases outlined by the DHS is ill-advised, given the current global economic climate, and these increases will hamper the growth and development of vulnerable services sector industries from developing economies.

That said, TTCSI is willing to meet with US Embassy Officials to share its concerns with the proposed increases and discuss what steps can be taken to ensure the free-flow of trade-in-services between both countries.

We must point out the myriad negative implications of the proposed hike in US Work Visa Fees for skilled professionals and entrepreneurs in T&T's services sector seeking to do business in the United States. The US also is a key target market for many professionals in the cultural and entertainment sector to earn foreign exchange. It is our view that these regulations may potentially harm cultural exchanges between the Caribbean region and United States, which is also seen as haven of employment opportunities for many skilled professionals in the services sector.

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Indeed, these increases may act as a disincentive for US companies to hire foreign talent, thus limiting potential opportunities for many skilled professionals in the services sector, and again negatively impact the free flow of trade-in-services between both countries.

We at TTCSI must point out that immigrant workers are not the only ones to be affected by the proposed fees hikes; families also are weighing the implications, too.

Requests from American citizens seeking to bring their fiancés to the US would see that fee increase to US\$720, a 35% jump.

In addition, US citizens and permanent residents hoping to sponsor certain family members for permanent residency (also known as a Green Card) would see those application fees increase by 33% to US\$710 under the proposed rule, while Green Card applications from immigrants already in the US would increase by 35% to US\$1,540.

However, one of the smallest fee increases is with requests to obtain US citizenship. That fee would increase by US\$120, or some 19%.

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