



OSAC
Bureau of Diplomatic Security
U.S. Department of State

Average Rating ★★★★★

6/2/2021 | 📄 OSAC Analysis

👁 88 all time - 1 last 7 days ★ 4.66 Average rating

Guide to U.S. Government-Assisted Evacuations

Summary

Within the U.S. Department of State, both OSAC and Consular Affairs can be a resource in the event of an escalating security threat involving private-sector personnel overseas. OSAC primarily provides situational analysis and security consultations to the U.S. private sector and facilitates connections to other U.S. Government (USG) entities. Consular Affairs should be U.S. citizens' primary point of contact for on-the-ground assistance during an emergency. However, organizations should not rely on U.S. government assistance in emergency evacuations and, when possible, should make independent and proactive evacuation plans.

This report aims to answer OSAC members' frequently asked questions about what the U.S. government can and cannot do to help U.S. citizens during a crisis by summarizing crisis-relevant information and Consular Affairs guidance into one product, making the first steps of crisis management clearer for OSAC members.

What the Department of State Can and Cannot Do in a Crisis

The actions the U.S. Department of State takes, and whether a U.S. government-assisted evacuation occurs, depends largely on the nature of the crisis. In severe situations, Consular Affairs may recommend that U.S. citizens leave the country immediately, though a U.S. government-assisted evacuation may not always be possible or desirable. Government-assisted evacuations are rare, and the onus often falls on the individual traveler or organization to remove themselves from dangerous situation in advance of an emergency. Organizations are strongly encouraged to make plans that do not rely on U.S. government assistance.

See further guidance on what the U.S. government can and cannot do to assist in an emergency can be found on the [Consular Affairs website](#), and is summarized below.

In general, the U.S. government cannot provide in-country transportation to assist evacuees in getting to the airport or other departure point, since security conditions may restrict the ability to move freely in the country. In the most extreme situations, Consular Affairs may encourage evacuees to stay at a safe location and leave as soon as they can do so safely, using transportation they are able to find on their own. If commercial transportation is unavailable, Consular Affairs may identify what other transportation options are available to help U.S. citizens leave the crisis area, if the conditions permit. While Consular Affairs works closely with the Department of Defense, U.S. citizens should not expect the U.S. military assistance when an evacuation is recommended; the conditions may not permit such assistance.

If a U.S. government-assisted evacuation is happening, evacuees should work with immigration officials to be sure they have any necessary visas, vaccinations, and/or other documentation. Generally, the U.S. government may provide a transportation option to a location away from the crisis event, usually a neighboring country or a different part of the same country. This nearby safe location is rarely the United States. It is also not guaranteed that immigration officials will allow evacuees to stay in the destination country for any extended length of time.

Regardless of the transportation method, U.S. citizens are responsible for reimbursing the government for the cost of evacuation travel. The amount billed to evacuees is based on the cost of a full fare economy flight, or comparable alternate transportation, to the designated destination(s) that would have been charged immediately prior to the events precipitating the evacuation. Evacuees are not guaranteed lodging or transportation expenses for travel beyond the original destination; however, consular officers may provide hotel recommendations and help evacuees apply for emergency financial assistance.

See Consular Affairs' advice: [How to Repay an Evacuation Loan](#)

Under the U.S. Department of State's "No Double Standard" policy, the Department is required to share the same *relevant* threat information with private U.S. citizens as the post communicates to the official U.S. government community. All U.S. citizens travelling abroad should enroll in the [Smart Traveler Enrollment Program \(STEP\)](#), which will provide travelers with information as a crisis develops. It is important that travelers keep their contact information up to date to receive relevant alerts.

A status change at a diplomatic mission (e.g. authorized or ordered departure of Mission personnel or dependents) does not mandate an operational change for the private sector. However, a drawdown of any proportion is likely indicative of a high risk to the safety of U.S. citizens. Further, limited staffing means that there are less resources available to assist U.S. citizens; therefore, the Department encourage organizations to develop contingency plans that do not rely on U.S. government assistance.

See OSAC's Report: [What are Drawdowns and How do They Impact Constituents?](#)

OSAC members should constantly monitor the signs of a deteriorating security environment and regularly adjust their travel policies accordingly. Before a crisis deteriorates, it is useful to develop decision points or indicators that the security situation on the ground may be changing for the worse, identify what your organization's response to these changes will be, and identify how the organization will execute those changes. Decision points encourage a re-evaluation of the current threat

landscape while allowing flexibility on an organization's response. Having a tailored and systematic decision-making plan, including specific tripwires and consideration of U.S. government guidance, could help private-sector organizations working in more tenuous security environments avoid the need for a costly and stressful evacuation.

See OSAC's Report: [Tripwire Emergency Planning](#)

Communication Options During a Crisis

Phone: In the event of an emergency overseas, U.S. citizens should call Consular Affairs at 1-888-407-4747 (from the United States and Canada) or +1-202-501-4444 (from overseas). Depending on the severity of the crisis and the number of U.S. citizens affected, hold times to speak to a person may be longer than usual. Please also consider using the other crisis-specific contact methods listed.

If the individual of concern about is not a U.S. citizen, please contact the nearest embassy or consulate of that person's nationality. Aid organizations, such as the Red Cross, can also be contacted for additional information on assistance they may provide.

Email: Consular Affairs may also set up a crisis-specific email address. This email address will be advertised in their public messaging and on travel.state.gov. Internet and cell phone service are often interrupted during a crisis. If this happens, Consular Affairs may use local television, radio, and other media outlets to help broadcast information.

Task Force Alert: In some crises, this online system activates so that U.S. citizens can inform the Department that they, or their loved ones, are in the crisis location. Consular officers can use this information to locate U.S. citizens and offer emergency consular assistance.

CLVs: Citizen Liaison Volunteers or "CLVs" are pre-designated community members who have volunteered to help embassies spread information to, and communicate with, U.S. citizens in designated areas in the event of an emergency. During a crisis, CLVs often help locate U.S. citizens and provide information in areas that are difficult to reach. Depending on the circumstances and their capabilities, CLVs may also be able to relay information about, or messages from, affected individuals.

See OSAC's report: [The American Liaison Network: A Resource and Model for Crisis Communication](#)

U.S. Government-Assisted Evacuations

Although organizations should prepare to evacuate without U.S. government, in the rare event of a major crisis overseas, the U.S. Embassy/Consulate may help organize evacuations to help U.S. citizens depart the country safely. Depending on the nature of the crisis, airports may not be operational. For example, a natural disaster could damage runways and other aviation infrastructure and make air transportation difficult for some time. Evacuations may depart from major cities or an intermediary point away from the security threat or destruction. In some cases, there may only be one or two major roads from one city to another, and those roads may be unavailable due to extensive traffic, destruction, or ongoing emergency response.

Items to consider in the event of a U.S. Government-Assisted evacuation:

U.S. citizens who only plan to leave "if things get worse" should consider that commercial transportation is cheaper, more comfortable, and more flexible than government-assisted transportation, but commercial options might become limited or unavailable as a crisis worsens.

There are no guarantees that an evacuation can be safely executed. Personnel may be required to spend additional time in-country after a disaster or during an ongoing crisis before departure becomes feasible.

U.S. Government evacuations are not free. The U.S. Government does organize evacuations, but each evacuated person will be required to pay his/her own way at a non-negotiable rate.

Anyone evacuated on USG-assisted transport, including charter and military flights, must sign an Evacuee Manifest and Promissory Note ([Form DS-5528](#)) prior to departure. This form lets the U.S. Department of State know who got on which transport, as well as how to contact evacuees for billing purposes. It will speed things up at the departure point if this form is filled out in advance. The cost is based on the most recent standard full-rate commercial fare between the starting and ending point of the flight. Evacuees will receive a bill later, and they may not be able to renew their passport until the cost of the evacuation is paid.

Evacuees must have a valid U.S. passport, legal permanent resident card ("Green Card"), or valid U.S. visa to enter the United States, even during an emergency. If an evacuee's passport is expired, they can be issued emergency travel documents. The documents will only be valid for a short period of time in order for the individual to depart the affected area. The best way to avoid this is to keep travel documents up-to-date at all times.

Evacuees may only bring one suitcase and one small carry-on during a USG-assisted evacuation. Do not expect to be able to bring a pet. Additionally, pack a one-month supply of any necessary medications in the carry-on bag.

During an evacuation, the U.S. Embassy/Consulate boards all U.S. citizens. Usually, minor U.S. citizens will travel with U.S. citizen parents; however, an unaccompanied U.S. citizen minor who cannot travel alone because of age or physical or mental incapacity may be accompanied by one non-citizen escort. Two or more U.S. citizen minors in the same family may also be accompanied by only one non-citizen escort. Any non-citizen escort must have proper documentation (including Power of Attorney permission from child's parents, giving him/her permission to take the child) and a valid visa.

If the chosen escort cannot meet these requirements, the family must select another eligible escort, have the child remain in the country of residence, or arrange for the child and escort to travel to a nearby safe haven.

Non-U.S. citizens who are immediate family members of an adult U.S. citizen may board if they have a visa for either the United States or an interim stopping point, depending on space availability. An immediate family member of an adult (over 21 years old) U.S. citizen is related through blood, marriage, adoption, or other legal family relationship, qualifying them as a "bona fide alien family member." This category does not include household staff or other local national personnel.

During a crisis, the U.S. Embassy/Consulate Consular Affairs Section can be quickly overwhelmed with incoming calls. Relatives and friends should be advised not to call the Consular Section for updates on the local situation or evacuation plans. All calls in the U.S. should be directed to the Overseas Citizen Services (OCS) call center at 1-888-407-4747 (from U.S. & Canada) and +1 202-501-4444 (from outside the U.S. & Canada). The call center will have the most up-to-date information.

Although it is primarily directed at Foreign Service personnel, this [Evacuation Preparation Checklist](#) contains useful information for private sector personnel on how to prepare for an evacuation.

See the CDC's resources on [Infection Control Guidance in the Event of an Evacuation](#) 

Emergency Medical Evacuations

Individual evacuations can occur due to personal emergencies, unrelated to political or natural disasters in-country. While Consular Affairs may assist in communicating with family members and transferring funds, insurance coverage and medical evacuation are the responsibility of the individual traveler or sponsoring organization. The U.S. Department of State encourages all travelers to purchase international medical insurance plans that include support for medical evacuations. The Department of State does [provide advice](#) about insurance options, but is not in a position to recommend specific service providers.

Travelers are strongly encouraged to create plans for emergencies that do not rely on U.S. government assistance. However, if a U.S. citizen becomes seriously ill or injured abroad, the American Citizens Services (ACS) section of a U.S. Embassy or Consulate may:

Assist in locating appropriate medical services;

Inform family or friends, with permission; and

Help transfer funds to the U.S. citizen overseas.

[Medical evacuation insurance](#) is a type of insurance used to help offset the cost of an unplanned medical or health-related crisis that requires more or different care than a local provider can manage. Having this type of plan allows a trained company to handle a health crisis and manage most associated payments.

Medical evacuation plans can focus on emergency medical evacuations, other international medical or health needs, or repatriation of human remains. Medical evacuation companies provide services such as air ambulances, the cost of which can be extremely high without insurance. Most include concierge assistance for case management and location of English-speaking doctors. Medical evacuation can also include translation/interpretation services, legal assistance, adventure sport coverage, trip interruption, lost/stolen items, physician-backed support center, and concierge services (associated business services). A policy may even include emergency reunion coverage, which brings a family member to the affected individual to assist with comfort, care, transport, etc.

Medical evacuation policies **generally cover "bed-to-bed" service**. This often includes: a medical representative/team going to the discharging hospital to meet and assess the patient, a team traveling with the patient on ground transport to an aircraft, a team (or individual) traveling with the patient on a flight (private or commercial aviation), and a team accompanying the patient via ground transport from the aircraft to the nearest adequate clinic/hospital and transitioning to receiving nurses. While U.S. consular services can assist with communication during this process, medical evacuations remain the responsibility of the traveler or sponsoring organization.

Additional Information

For more information on USG-assisted evacuations in a specific region or country, contact OSAC's regional teams using one of the email addresses below.

Africa: OSACafrica@state.gov 

Americas: OSACamericas@state.gov 

Asia: OSACasia@state.gov 

Europe: OSACEurope@state.gov 

Middle East and North Africa: OSACmena@state.gov 

In emergency situations requiring direct OSAC support, as opposed to that of Consular Affairs and American Citizen Services, members can contact the 24/7 OSAC Emergency Duty Officer at 202-309-5056 or OSACEmergency@state.gov .

Additionally, review the following resources for more information.

OSAC Report: [Risk Matrix](#)

OSAC Report: [Understanding the Consular Travel Advisory System](#)

OSAC Report: [The American Liaison Network: A Resource and Model for Crisis Communication](#)

The opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of State or any affiliated organization(s). Nor have these opinions been approved or sanctioned by these organizations. This product is unclassified based on the definitions in E.O. 12958. OSAC's full disclaimer and copyright policy is available on our site at [OSAC.gov/About/Disclaimer](#) .

Attachments

 [OSAC - Evacuations.pdf](#) 

Related Content



 [OSAC Risk Matrix](#)

1/21/2021 | Report

 [Understanding the Consular Travel Advisory System](#)

2/15/2019 | Report



The contents of this (U) report in no way represent the policies, views, or attitudes of the United States Department of State, or the United States Government, except as otherwise noted (e.g., travel advisories, public statements). The document was compiled from various open sources and (U) embassy reporting. Please note that all OSAC products are for internal U.S. private sector security purposes only. Publishing or otherwise distributing OSAC-derived information in a manner inconsistent with this policy may result in the discontinuation of OSAC support.