

Frequently Asked Questions

June 4, 2019

Frequently Asked Questions on Social Media Identifiers in the DS-160 and DS-260

What forms have been updated?

We have updated our nonimmigrant visa online application form (DS-160), the paper back-up version of the nonimmigrant visa application (DS-156), and the online immigrant visa application form (DS-260).

What specific changes have been made to the visa application forms? When did these changes go into effect?

The updated forms collect social media identifiers. These changes went into effect on May 31, 2019.

National security is our top priority when adjudicating visa applications, and every prospective traveler and immigrant to the United States undergoes extensive security screening. We are constantly working to find mechanisms to improve our screening processes to protect U.S. citizens, while supporting legitimate travel to the United States.

What is a social media handle/identifier?

A social media “handle” or “identifier” is any name used by the individual on social media platforms including, but not limited to, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The updated visa application forms list the specific social media platforms for which identifiers are being requested.

Who will be affected?

All nonimmigrant and immigrant visa applicants will be required to answer these questions, except for applicants applying for the following types of nonimmigrant visas: A-1, A-2, C-2, C-3 (except attendants, servants, or personal employees of accredited officials), G-1, G-2, G-3, G-4, NATO-1, NATO-2, NATO-3, NATO-4, NATO-5, or NATO-6 visas.

Why were these changes implemented?

We are constantly working to find mechanisms to improve our screening processes and to support legitimate travel and immigration to the United States while protecting U.S. citizens. This update implements the President’s March 6, 2017, Memorandum for the Secretary of State, the Attorney General, and the Secretary of Homeland Security and Section 5 of Executive Order 13780. Section 2 of the Memorandum directed certain Cabinet officials to, as permitted by law, “implement protocols and procedures as soon

as practicable that in their judgment will enhance the screening and vetting of applications for visas and other immigration benefits, so as to increase the safety and security of the American people.”

Section 5 of E.O. 13780 directs the Department of State and other agencies to implement a program, as part of the process for adjudicating applications for visas and other immigration benefits, to improve screening and vetting. Section 5 of E.O. 13780 refers to the implementation of uniform screening and vetting standards for all immigration programs. Section 5 includes a recommendation that agencies amend application forms to “include questions aimed at identifying fraudulent answers and malicious intent.” In coordination with the Attorney General, DHS, and the Director of National Intelligence, the Department of State has undertaken these efforts to update our application forms to protect national security.

What are you looking for, and what do you plan to do with my information?

We are looking solely for social media identifiers. Consular officers will not request user passwords. The information will be used, as all information provided during a visa interview and on the visa application, to determine if the applicant is eligible for a visa under existing U.S. law. Collecting this additional information from visa applicants will strengthen our process for vetting applicants and confirming their identity.

What if applicants participate in multiple online platforms? Are they being asked to list all of their handles, or only one?

Applicants must provide all identifiers used for all listed platforms.

What if the visa applicant doesn't have a social media account?

A response to the questions related to social media will be required. Visa applicants who have never used social media will not be refused on the basis of failing to provide a social media identifier, and the form does allow the applicant to respond with "None." Applicants should complete the application as fully and honestly as possible to avoid any delays in processing. Failure to provide accurate and truthful responses on a visa application or during a visa interview may result in denial of the visa by a consular officer. In the case of an applicant who has used any of the social media platforms listed on the visa application in the preceding five years, the associated social media identifier would be required on the visa application form.

Do these new social media requirements affect individuals who already hold a U.S. visa?

This update only applies to new visa applications. However, visa applicants are continuously screened – both at the time of their application and afterwards – to ensure they remain eligible to travel to the United States.

Does this social media screening also apply to participants in the Visa Waiver Program?

This Department update only applies to visa applicants, not to individuals traveling under the Visa Waiver Program. For questions about requirements under the Visa Waiver Program, please contact the Department of Homeland Security.

Is this just a way to profile individuals by their religion, political views, or race?

Consular officers cannot deny visas based on applicants' race, religion, ethnicity, national origin, political views, gender, or sexual orientation. The collection of social media identifiers is consistent with this. This information will be used for identity resolution and to determine whether the applicant is eligible for a U.S. visa under U.S. law. Visa ineligibilities are set forth in U.S. law. Consular officers will not request user passwords and will not attempt to subvert any privacy controls applicants may have implemented on these platforms.

Could the collection of this information be considered an invasion of privacy?

No. The same safeguards and confidentiality provisions that already protect a visa applicant's personal information also apply to social media identifiers and all other newly collected information related to a visa application or adjudication. Consular officers will not request user passwords nor will they have any ability to modify privacy controls applicants may have implemented on these platforms. Maintaining robust screening standards for visa applicants is a dynamic practice that must adapt to emerging threats. We already request limited contact information, travel history, family member information, and previous addresses from all visa applicants. Collecting this additional information from visa applicants will strengthen our process for vetting applicants and confirming their identity. Consular officers would only use this information to determine the applicant's eligibility for a visa under existing U.S. law.

What safeguards are in place to protect applicants' private information? What about U.S. citizens' information that might appear on social media?

The Department limits its collection to information relevant to a visa adjudication. In accordance with U.S. law, information collected in the nonimmigrant or immigrant visa application or adjudication process is considered confidential and may be used only for certain purposes expressly authorized by law, including the formulation, amendment, administration, or enforcement of U.S. laws. The Department is also taking measures to ensure that information from U.S. persons that is inadvertently included in this collection is adequately protected in accordance with applicable privacy laws.