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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

CHRISTOPHER R. HIXON, STAFF DIRECTOR
MARGARET E. DAUM, MINORITY STAFF DIRECTOR

August 16, 2017

The Honorable Rex W. Tillerson
Secretary
Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Tillerson:

I write to request information about a number of reported incidents of American tourists vacationing in Mexico consuming potentially tainted alcohol, including information regarding the death of 20-year-old Wisconsinite, Abbey Conner.¹

In January 2017, Ms. Conner was on vacation with her family in Mexico when she and her brother, Austin Conner, were reportedly found face down in the Iberostar Paraiso del Mar pool.² When taken from the pool it was discovered that Mr. Conner had suffered a concussion and Ms. Conner had a broken clavicle.³ Ms. Conner and her brother were rushed to a local hospital in the Cancun region. Mr. Conner recovered; however, Ms. Conner was subsequently airlifted to Florida, pronounced brain dead and removed from life support just days later.⁴ According to the family, at least one factor in Ms. Conner's death is likely related to her having potentially been served "adulterated" alcohol.⁵

My office has been in contact with the Department's Office of American Citizen Services. I appreciate the Department's recent efforts to assist the family, and am aware that a four-page memorandum detailing the incident at the resort was provided by the family to the Department.

¹ Raquel Rutledge, *U.S. State Department Warns Tourists about Tainted Alcohol at Mexico Resorts after Blackouts Reported*, Journal Sentinel (July 26, 2017), <http://www.jsonline.com/story/news/investigations/2017/07/26/u-s-state-department-issues-travel-warning-tainted-alcohol-mexico-resorts-after-tourists-blackouts/513563001/>.

² Raquel Rutledge, *A Mexican Vacation, A Mysterious Death, and Now Endless Questions for Wisconsin Family*, Journal Sentinel (July 11, 2017), <http://www.jsonline.com/story/news/2017/07/12/wisconsin-family-questions-daughters-mysterious-drowning-mexico/469647001/>.

³ Comm. staff telephone meeting with Ginny McGowan (Aug. 14, 2017).

⁴ Raquel Rutledge, *A Mexican Vacation, A Mysterious Death, and Now Endless Questions for Wisconsin Family*, Journal Sentinel (July 11, 2017), <http://www.jsonline.com/story/news/2017/07/12/wisconsin-family-questions-daughters-mysterious-drowning-mexico/469647001/>.

⁵ Comm. staff telephone meeting with Ginny McGowan (Aug. 14, 2017).

My office has also communicated with the Conners' mother, Ginny McGowan, and the family has expressed concerns about the lack of openness shown by the resort staff and local authorities in Mexico. In an effort to assist the family, my staff met with the Embassy of Mexico to discuss this tragic incident and the actions taken by Mexican authorities.⁶ Embassy staff expressed their condolences to the Conner family, describing Ms. Conner's death as an "accident," which is reportedly what the local Mexican authorities have characterized it as. Just recently, however, Mexican authorities reportedly suspended a bar at the Iberostar Paraiso del Mar resort, and seized 10,000 gallons of illicit alcohol from an unnamed company.⁷

Given these circumstances, I continue to share the McGowan family's concerns about the lack of transparency surrounding what happened. I am waiting on a response from the Mexican Embassy to a number of my questions, and I request that the Department do everything in its power to obtain information from the Mexican Government to help provide this Wisconsin family some closure.

A number of other American tourists have reported incidents allegedly connected with tainted alcoholic beverages while vacationing at Mexican resorts.⁸ Recently, the Department added language to the "Safety or Security" section of its website on travel to Mexico to alert American tourists of potentially "tainted or substandard alcohol."⁹

To assist the Committee in understanding the circumstances surrounding Ms. Conner's death and the recent number of reported incidents connected to potentially tainted alcohol, I respectfully request a response to the following questions:

- 1) What communications have occurred between the Department and the Government of Mexico regarding Ms. Conner's death?
- 2) What factors contributed to the Department's decision to add language to its website on travel to Mexico regarding potentially tainted alcohol?
 - a. What communications have occurred between the Department and the Government of Mexico regarding potentially tainted alcohol?
 - b. What reports have been provided by the Government of Mexico to the Department regarding prior finding of use of unregulated or tainted alcohol at resorts?
 - c. Has any information or reports from the recent suspension of the bar at the Iberostar Paraiso del Mar resort been provided to the Department?

⁶ Comm. staff meeting with Embassy of Mexico staff (Aug. 9, 2017).

⁷ Raquel Rutledge, *Mexican Authorities Seize Illicit Alcohol in Crackdown at Resorts*, Journal Sentinel (Aug. 12, 2017), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2017/08/12/mexican-authorities-seize-illicit-alcohol-crackdown-resorts/562385001/>.

⁸ Raquel Rutledge, *As Dozens More Report Blackouts at Mexico Resorts, Country Says it will Act on Tainted Alcohol*, Journal Sentinel (July 28, 2017), <http://www.jsonline.com/story/news/investigations/2017/07/28/amid-more-blackout-reports-mexico-says-take-action-tainted-alcohol-resorts/519101001/>.

⁹ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, Safety and Security, Mexico, <https://travel.state.gov/content/passports/en/country/mexico.html> (last visited Aug. 15, 2017).

- 3) Does the Department track the number of incidents at Mexican resorts involving potentially tainted alcohol?
 - a. How should Americans report incidents involving potentially tainted alcohol to the Department?

Please provide this information as soon as possible but no later than 5:00 p.m. on September 8, 2017.

The Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs is authorized by Rule XXV of the Standing Rules of the Senate to investigate “the efficiency, economy, and effectiveness of all agencies and departments of the Government,”¹⁰ Additionally, S. Res. 62 (115th Congress) authorizes the Committee to examine “the efficiency and economy of all branches of the Government including the possible existence of fraud, misfeasance, malfeasance, collusion, mismanagement, incompetence, corruption, or unethical practices”¹¹

If you have any questions about this letter, please contact me or have your staff contact Brian Downey of my Committee staff at (202) 224-4751. Thank you for your attention to these matters.

Sincerely,



Ron Johnson
Chairman

cc: The Honorable Claire McCaskill
Ranking Member

¹⁰ S. Rule XXV(k); *see also* S. Res. 445, 108th Cong. (2004).

¹¹ S. Res. 62 § 12, 115th Cong. (2017).