

QUESTION: My wife's aunt is having a hard time getting a visitor's visa. Can you help? Both my wife and I are U.S. citizens. My wife has an aunt in Nigeria who is like her second mother. We would like this aunt to visit us here. However, the aunt, who's close to her 70s, has had a hard time getting a visitor's visa. She has tried through the years without success. How can we help? We are prepared to cover all her expenses.

ANSWER: With your help, your wife's aunt might get a visitor's visa. No guarantees, but it can't hurt to try. Getting a visitor's visa is often difficult for residents of developing countries like Nigeria. That's because to get a visitor's visa, an applicant must prove that he or she will return after the visit. The U.S. government is concerned that visitors from countries with high unemployment and civil strife, like Nigeria, might stay here illegally. Visitor's visa applicants in developing countries need to make an extra effort to provide consuls proof that they have ties to their place of residence. Still, as your wife's aunt gets older and is less likely to work in the United States, she might be able to get the visa, especially if you have the resources and willingness to pay for her trip.

If the aunt is working, she should provide an employer's letter and tax returns. If she has close family in Nigeria, especially children or siblings, that will help prove that she is likely to return. While it seems your wife's aunt has few assets, I note for other visitor's visa applicants that if you own your own house or apartment, bring the ownership title. Students should bring a letter from their school and a copy of their school transcript.

You say that the consul has denied her previous visa applications. Let's see what you can do to help change that. Start by providing evidence that you can and will pay her expenses in the United States. You can send her an invitation letter that explains your offer to cover all expenses. You also might send her an affidavit of support with a bank-account report and/or income-tax return attached. If she'll be staying with you and your wife, mention that in the letter and explain what accommodations you have for her.

Also helpful in applying for a visitor's visa is a clear and detailed itinerary for the visit. The consular officer will want to know what plans your wife's aunt has while in the United States. Sometimes a consular officer will be more sympathetic to a visitor's application if the visitor is coming for a specific event, such as a wedding or college graduation. If your aunt is coming for such an event, if possible, she should bring a printed invitation.

People often ask whether they should purchase a round-trip ticket before applying for their visa. That's a tough one. If the applicant gets a refundable ticket, at least he or she won't lose money if the consul denies the application. Then again, a refundable ticket won't add much to your aunt's claim that she plans to return home. A nonrefundable ticket is more persuasive, but I hate to see people lose their money, as often happens to applicants with limited ties to their home countries. I usually recommend against purchasing nonrefundable tickets unless a consular officer specifically requests one.

Allan Wernick is an attorney and a professor at Baruch College, City University of New York. He directs CUNY's Citizenship and Immigration Project. He is the author of "U.S. Immigration & Citizenship - Your Complete Guide, Revised 4th Edition."

