

Matt Thistlethwaite MP. hears from local travel agents



L-R: AFTA CEO Darren Rudd, Matt Thistlethwaite MP and Penny Spencer, MD Spencer Travel in her Mascot office.

(August 12) With a second wave of COVID-19 cases leading to more border shutdowns, Matt Thistlethwaite MP visited local travel agents to discuss the impact COVID-19 continues to have on their businesses.

The meetings were co-ordinated by the Australian Federation of Travel Agents (AFTA), with AFTA CEO Darren Rudd also attending.

Penny Spencer, Managing Director of Spencer Travel in Mascot, spoke with Mr. Thistlethwaite MP. about navigating the constant border closures for her clients.

“Travel between Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane represents 40% of my business,” says Penny.

“We've been busy providing hourly updates to clients around the political decisions, and it takes us 5 times as long to alter or cancel a booking than make it. When the Queensland borders opened we had bookings to Hayman and Hamilton Islands, then the borders shut again. There's thousands of tickets we're still managing.”

Michelle Geagea, owner of Déjà Vu Travel in Maroubra, agrees COVID-19 has put agents in a stressful and financially difficult position - stuck between

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government restrictions; confusing airline policies; struggling suppliers and loyal clients who just want a fair outcome.

“We had one of the biggest wholesalers in the industry cancel \$700,000 worth of our bookings earlier this year and go into liquidation, leaving our clients stranded and our team having to pick up the pieces and take money out of our own pockets to rebook client holidays,” says Michelle. “We’re still recovering from that on top of dealing with the pandemic’s impact on my business – JobKeeper just isn’t enough when we are bleeding money.”

“As a small, independent agency owner, I’m proud we’re surviving and our clients will always come first, but Government needs to understand the situation we’re in and provide support as we are the industry suffering the most. We want to be here for our clients and we have many clients ready and eager to travel now.”

Barbara Whitten, Managing Director of Anywhere Travel in Kingsford, agrees tailored Government support is critical for travel agents.

“We have fixed costs to meet, but ongoing border closures mean we have nothing to sell, which is a difficult position to be in as a travel retailer,” says Barbara.

“Unless there’s a clear plan around borders reopening people won’t travel. There’s also the issue of our staff, from the veterans of 10 and 20 years to young people just starting travel careers with us.”

“We want our local staff because we’re a close knit community, and the JobKeeper extension is of course welcome, but if travel agents don’t receive some tailored support from Government many will look elsewhere for employment or retire.”

“We could lose decades worth of industry skills and experience.”

- ENDS -

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L-R: AFTA CEO Darren Rudd, Michelle Geagea, owner of Déjà Vu Travel in Maroubra and Matt Thistlethwaite MP.

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Notes to Editors:

The Australian Federation of Travel Agents (AFTA) is the peak body in Australia representing the retail travel industry. Founded in 1957, AFTA represents the majority of travel agents in Australia and includes all of the major travel agency groups.

AFTA's role is to uphold the interests of members in matters relating to the operation of all travel agencies in Australia. In broad terms these issues are ones that are not addressed by agent chain or corporate entities on behalf of their members, and are ones that involve the industry as a whole.
