

Bi-partisan Letter to express concerns regarding the J-1 Visa BridgeUSA program

Sending Office: Honorable Chris Pappas

Sent By: Nandini.Narayan@mail.house.gov

Request for Signature(s)

Deadline: Tuesday May 17th at 6p.m.

Co-Leads: Congressman Chris Pappas, Congressman Blake Moore, Congressman John Curtis and Congresswoman Ann Kuster

Supporting groups: U.S. Travel Association, Alliance for International Exchange, and IAAPA, The Global Association for the Attractions Industry

[SIGN ON USING QUILL](#)

Dear Colleague,

We invite you to join our bipartisan letter to Sec. Blinken urging Dept. of State to ensure a timely and sufficient process for the J-1 Visa BridgeUSA program participants.

The SWT and Camp Counselor programs help to support and supplement workers at seasonal businesses and camps in iconic American tourist and rural destinations. There are roughly over 300,000 participants from more than 200 countries and territories visit the United States on a J-1 cultural exchange visa each year. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, participation in these programs decreased by 96 percent in 2020, and by 75 percent in 2021, when compared to 2019.

We must do more for these programs that provide international exchange students from around the world the opportunity to experience and learn about the people and culture of the United States.

Sincerely,

Chris Pappas, Member of Congress

Blake Moore, Member of Congress

John Curtis, Member of Congress

Ann Kuster, Member of Congress

Dear Secretary Blinken:

We are writing to express our concerns regarding efforts undertaken by the Bureau of Consular Affairs that are negatively affecting the economy and workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We request that the Department immediately ensures a timely and sufficient process for the J-1 Visa BridgeUSA program participants. These programs provide international exchange students from around the world the opportunity to experience and learn about the people and culture of the United States. These programs also enable students to work temporary seasonal jobs to help offset the costs associated with these cultural experiences. As an added value, these students supplement the teams of many seasonal businesses around the country, many that simply can't operate at full capacity without them. They are also vital to the economic, public diplomacy and foreign policy interests of the United States at little to no cost to the American taxpayer.

The SWT and Camp Counselor programs help to support and supplement workers at seasonal businesses and camps in iconic American tourist and rural destinations. There are roughly over 300,000 participants from more than 200 countries and territories visit the United States on a J-1 cultural exchange visa each year. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, participation in these programs decreased by 96 percent in 2020, and by 75 percent in 2021, when compared to 2019.

BridgeUSA (formerly the J-1 Exchange Visitor Program) was created alongside the Peace Corps and United States Agency for International Development during the Cold War to promote the diplomatic and foreign affairs goals of the United States, goals the Department of State still advances in administering BridgeUSA as Federal cultural exchange programs to this day. The work component of certain BridgeUSA programs, the largest public diplomacy program offered by the United States, makes travel to the United States possible for a broad and diverse group of international students and young people.

Annually the ski industry embraces more than 8,000 SWT participants from the Southern Hemisphere who provide a richer cultural experience for their coworkers and guests, while learning important skills about the recreation and hospitality business. SWT participants also generate significant positive economic impacts, spending, and taxes in communities where they are located. There are similar cultural and economic benefits among participants from the Northern Hemisphere who are placed in small rural communities that attract large crowds in the summer at national parks, amusement parks, attractions, and resorts across the country.

Below are some of the key statistics from a couple of comprehensive reviews of the Camp Counselor and SWT programs:

- 91% of Summer Work Travel (SWT) Program participants report cultural exchange as their top reason for participating in the Program
- 84% of Camp Counselors report having a more positive view of America after working at a camp
- 76% of SWT Program participants reported a positive change in views regarding the United States
- 50% of employers stated that the absence of the SWT Program participants would have a negative impact on revenues
- 39% of employers said they would have to reduce hours of operation without the SWT Program
- 91% of host camps believe their organization would be negatively impacted by the absence of international Camp Counselor
- 78% of host camps indicated that camp services and activities would be reduced in the absence of international Camp Counselors

The SWT and Camp Counselor programs are at a critical juncture for the summer 2022 season. We are concerned that the present restrictions and visa processing delays will prevent participants from visiting the U.S. this summer. These experiences may leave young people around the world with the impression that the United States is an unwelcoming place and leave U.S. employers unable to meet their seasonal workforce needs. We urge the Department of State to consider the cultural and economic importance of these programs and prioritize reopening consular facilities to process visa applications for BridgeUSA applicants as well as other visitors to the United States.

With your assistance, we can promote American values, openness, and engagement with people around the world through these vital public diplomacy programs. Moreover, BridgeUSA participants strengthen tourism and youth camp economies by supporting American businesses, accelerating long-needed economic recovery in our communities.

Respectfully,