



March 23, 2020

Kevin Saba
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Private Sector Exchange, Acting
Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
U.S. Department of State
Washington, D.C., 20520

Dear Mr. Saba,

In response to the unprecedented challenges posed by COVID-19, CSIET and the Alliance for International Exchange have coordinated with the J-1 high school community to propose interim measures to be taken in the wake of this crisis. We believe that by taking immediate action, we can mitigate risk to the J-1 program without sacrificing the safety and welfare of participants, local coordinators, or host families.

J-1 high school sponsor organizations find themselves in an unstable and ever-changing situation. Government travel restrictions, a reduction in enrollments, and mass cancellations by both enrolled students and host families all point to severe loss of income and a possible existential threat to the program at large. Based on a series of surveys, conference calls, and one on one discussions with our various members, we would like to propose the following interim measures for the J-1 High School program on behalf of the community.

Adopt an interim, online host family interview requirement

In accordance with ongoing social distancing directives, we believe that adopting of an interim, online interview requirement, in which all members of a household participate and in which a virtual tour of the home is conducted should be accepted as an alternative to in-home interviews until social distancing directives are lifted. In home interviews could be reinstated in their traditional form after social distancing directives are lifted.

Extend the August 31, 2020 deadline

Programs are concerned about the ability to recruit host families in what increasingly appears to be a very truncated recruiting and vetting season. We believe that extending the August 31, 2020 deadline would be universally beneficial to all constituents as a measure to provide a safer, more efficient and effective vetting process.

Temporarily substitute second semester in person visits to students and host families with online video calls

Again, in efforts to minimize risk associated with in-person contact during the COVID-19 pandemic, we believe maintaining monthly check-ins with students and host families. However, transferring this process to an online platform temporarily would mitigate the risk of COVID-19 infection while still maintaining program protocols.

Temporarily allow host families to house more than two students if students are waiting to return home due to travel bans

Students who remain in the U.S. because of travel bans face a precarious situation. As the number of available host families dwindles during this crisis, allowing more than two students to reside with one family would ease tensions for all parties.

Provide reassurance to private sector programs and their schools

Sponsors are concerned that the J-1 high school program will be cancelled in the near-term and next year. We believe that the program would be best served by ECA providing reassurance to private sector programs and their schools, stating the relevance of the program and ECA's support of the program going forward.

Offer general flexibility towards sponsor organizations

During this unprecedented time, all parties involved in the J-1 high school program are facing numerous limitations and pressures. Making small, temporary adjustments to meet these needs will go far in sustaining the program. For example, substituting the secondary visit with a virtual check-in conducted by volunteer would be one such compromise. In the same vein, due to the conditions, CBCs may be delayed which may prevent sponsors from approving families, volunteers, and local coordinators in time. The community hopes to work closely with ECA to discuss regulatory flexibility in the face of myriad complicated issues, while continuing to ensure exchange visitors' health and safety, and the program's reputation are at the forefront of this effort.

CSIET and the Alliance and ECA have a long history of working together to face difficult challenges in the international exchange community. We believe that together with ECA we can tackle the unprecedented situation before us, and buoy this J-1 high school program that has for years been one of the most important tools for public diplomacy.

Thank you for considering our proposed, interim measures. We will continue to engage with you in support of the J-1 high school program, and we look forward to working with you to determine the best path forward for 2020-2021.

Sincerely,

Chris Page, Executive Director, CSIET

Ilir Zherka, Executive Director, The Alliance for International Exchange