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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6225

April 13, 2021

Mr. Matthew Lussenop
Acting Assistant Secretary
Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

Mr. Ian Brownlee
Acting Assistant Secretary
Bureau of Consular Affairs
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Acting Assistant Secretaries Lussenop and Brownlee:

I am writing to express support for the restoration of a number of Public Diplomacy programs that promote U.S. values, support small businesses, and help ensure that the United States remains the top destination for international students. However, I am concerned over inconsistencies in the processing of particular visas throughout consulates and embassies throughout the world, specifically programs administered through the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. Lack of clarity at consular offices and uncertainty regarding the proclamation's implementation have taken a toll on J-1 visa programs, especially the sponsors and visa applicants. J-1 work and study programs are some of the most effective, and cost effective tools in American public diplomacy and the United States has long been the top destination country for international students in higher education. Young people visiting the United States to work and study under these programs, including 6,400 each year in New Jersey alone through J-1 programs, provide needed services and revenue to American businesses and institutions.

Just as importantly, most build lasting connections and affinity for their host communities, as well as an understanding of the United States that they will take with them into adulthood and careers in their home countries. Many of these participants often end up in policy and international businesses, maintaining their connections with the United States. .

Additionally, more than one million international students were enrolled in U.S. institutions during the 2019-2020 school year, adding \$39 billion to the U.S. economy and creating 416,000 new jobs, as well as extending American culture and values to their home countries. However, student visa delays and denials over the past year have led to a 43% drop in international student enrollment which had experienced a decade of consistent growth prior.

I understand that many of these applicants are now unable to obtain visa appointments despite F1 university and J1 high school exchange students being exempt from last year's travel ban, and the proclamation's expiration on March 31st. Discrepancies between consulates in their willingness to schedule visa appointments have led applicants to receive conflicting guidance even within the same consulate. The State Department's prolonged review of the J-1 visa

program is inhibiting some organizations from expanding the work they already do, and preventing others from becoming official State Department designated sponsors.

New Jersey proudly hosts over 5,000 participants in summer work travel exchanges, as well as over 1,400 camp counselors and interns through the J-1 visa program. The J-1 program is at a critical juncture for the summer 2021 season and further visa issuance delays will prevent the program from taking place this summer. Without these students many businesses will be forced to cut back full-time staff positions and New Jersey's tourism communities and already pandemic weakened economy will suffer further.

Given the importance of the EVP program, I ask that you provide a status update on the review of the J-1 Visa program, as well as the hold on applications for all trainee/intern/camp counselor programs, and initiatives your Department is taking to increase the number of international visitors coming to the United States under the EVP program. As we also get closer to the start of the 2021 academic school year, I also ask that you provide an update on the status of F-1 visa issuances.

I also ask that you provide an update of which embassies and consulates are currently facing a significant backlog of J-1 and F-1 visa applications and the steps being taken to clear these backlogs in time for the applicants to arrive in the U.S. for the summer work season and the academic school year.

I absolutely appreciate that because of the COVID-19 pandemic our diplomats are working hard, embassies are under immense pressure and restrictions, and that we must prioritize the safety and security of American citizens abroad. However, these cultural and educational exchange programs are a vital component of a robust public diplomacy strategy that promotes American values, openness, and engagement with people across the world. Moreover, American business, including many in New Jersey, have come to depend on the services and revenue these young people provide. International education students, as noted, contribute greatly to educational growth. It is vital that the State Department address concerns before long-term damage is done, both the businesses and young people that depend on the smooth functioning of these programs and the standing of the United States as a destination for those young people to work, learn and expand their horizons. Therefore, I look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Robert Menendez". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "R" and a long, sweeping underline.

Robert Menendez
Chairman