

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 30, 2021

The Honorable Tony Blinken
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

I write to express concern about the current status of J-1 student and cultural exchange visa processing.

In a normal year, approximately 300,000 people from around the world come to the U.S. under the J-1 visa program as students and as exchange visitors. J-1 visitors participate in a variety of different exchange programs that provide them with the opportunity to study, work and experience American culture while supporting American families, businesses and educational institutions. Less well known, however, is that many seasonal small businesses, particularly those in the tourism sector, are critically dependent on J-1 visitors to supplement their workforce and operate at capacity during their busy summer season.

I was disappointed that the Administration never rescinded the previous Administration's Proclamation 10052, which had prevented the arrival of many of those on J-1 visas through March 31, 2021. Even though that ban has now expired, serious processing backlogs and delays remain that are preventing applicants for seasonal J-1 visas from arriving this summer. I am hearing a tremendous amount of concern from seasonal small businesses, who fear the devastating impact of not being able to meet their workforce needs during the summer season. At a moment when these businesses are already in trouble from the impact of COVID-19 last summer, this is an additional blow that they can ill afford.

I am also concerned by the increased backlog of au pair applications, meaning a severe lack of critical support for families needing child care. Many of these families have working parents who desperately require child care to continue contributing to our economic recovery. This backlog disproportionately affects working mothers, many of whom have had to withdraw themselves from the workforce to care for children in the absence of child care options during the pandemic.

I understand that embassies and consulates continue to face many challenges due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic around the world, and I know that the Department of State is working to balance a number of competing consular priorities during the current crisis. Maintaining an appropriate public health posture at our overseas posts is important, but it is also important to recognize that there are direct costs imposed on U.S. businesses when they are unable to meet their staffing needs.

Given the time-sensitive nature of seasonal J-1 arrivals, it is critical that the Department expedite the processing of J-1 applications whenever and wherever possible. Therefore, I request the Department make publicly available information concerning which consulates and embassies are processing J-1 applications so that families, businesses and others can make informed decisions regarding what to expect from this season. This would help them focus their hiring on those countries most likely to have embassies and consulates processing these visas. I also request a detailed plan on how the State Department will improve the processing of J-1 visa applications and facilitate the timely arrival of the temporary visitors our communities need this summer.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter. Administrative action is urgently needed to address current visa delays and prevent harm to American communities. I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jeanne Shaheen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senate