



September 23, 2021

The Honorable Brian McKeon
Deputy Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Mr. Deputy Secretary:

The Alliance applauds the Administration's decision to lift all Covid-19 travel bans. This step is critical to supporting not only the U.S. economic recovery, but also the educational and cultural exchange programs that support our national security.

As you know, exchange participants develop strong ties to and an affinity for the United States after their visits. A central feature of our nation's people-to-people diplomacy is that we draw from a wide range of nations, including those with struggling economies and political systems.

While the Administration's plans to lift travel bans will facilitate international exchange for many nations, barring unvaccinated travelers from entering the United States will disproportionately affect people from developing nations where vaccinations are not readily available, especially the young who make up most exchange visitors. Moreover, while the vaccines in use in many of those countries are approved by the World Health Organization, they are not yet approved by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. That puts visa applicants from developing nations at a potential disadvantage.

Given this unintended impact, we offer the following recommendations for the Department as it considers how to implement its new approach to international travel:

- Allow entry for travelers who have received a WHO-approved Covid-19 vaccine
- Continue allowing proof of a negative test for travelers from countries that are struggling to vaccinate their people
- Extend National Interest Exemptions to all exchange programs between now and November in countries where travel bans are set to be lifted

Currently, the Department requires some exchange visitors who enter after showing a negative test to become vaccinated within a defined period. Program sponsors are required to ensure that occurs. These requirements could be made universal, which would advance the Administration's goal of helping to vaccinate people abroad.

While these measures will alleviate the challenges associated with proof of vaccination, visa processing challenges are likely to continue. The Department has certainly taken some



important steps to help facilitate J-1 visa processing, including the decision to waive interviews for academic J-1 visa applicants in countries that participate in the Visa Waiver Program.

While the Alliance welcomes that recent policy change, it should be applied across similarly situated programs. Whether on academic or cultural exchange programs, J-1 applicants go through the same recruitment and screening process, are motivated to come to the U.S. for the same type of cultural exchange experiences, and have a similar, positive impact on our economy and national security. As such, the Department ought to treat these applicants similarly by extending the visa interview waiver to all J-1 applicants from countries that participate in the Visa Waiver Program.

The Alliance greatly appreciates the recent measures the Department has taken to facilitate international exchange. With additional assistance through the above steps, the Department can lessen the financial damage the Covid-19 pandemic has caused in the exchange community and provide equal opportunity for exchange applicants worldwide.

Thank you for your consideration and for your strong support of international exchange programs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ilir Zherka".

Ilir Zherka
Executive Director