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POLITICS

Trump Administration Considering Cuts to Cultural Exchange Visas

Summer work travel, au pair visas under review



Coney Island in New York's Brooklyn on July 4. The Trump administration is considering major reductions in cultural exchange programs, including those for summer workers. PHOTO: RICHARD B. LEVINE/ZUMA PRESS

By *Laura Meckler*

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WASHINGTON—The Trump administration is considering major reductions in cultural exchange programs, including those for au pairs and summer workers, that allow young people from foreign countries to work in the U.S., people familiar with the administration's planning said.

President Donald Trump's "Buy American and Hire American" executive order, issued in April, calls for a review of U.S. immigration rules to ensure that the interests of domestic workers are protected. No decisions have been made, but supporters of the program worry changes will be made without a full public debate.

A White House-led interagency working group is particularly focused on five employment-based programs that are part of the J-1 visa exchange visitor program, according to people familiar with the discussion.

"The administration has concerns" about all of the visas that allow for guest workers, said Jessica Vaughan, director of policy studies at the Center for Immigration Studies, which wants to limit legal and illegal immigration. "But there are particular programs that need more attention because of their size, their effect on the U.S. labor market, and because a significant number of people overstay their visas."

People familiar with the conversations said the review includes the summer work-travel program, which brings more than 100,000 students to the U.S. each summer, often stationed in tourist destinations such as beach resorts and national parks. It also includes the smaller au pair program, through which foreigners live in American homes and provide child care as well as take classes and participate in intercultural exchanges with their host families. Other programs under discussion include those for camp counselors, interns and trainees.

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The J-1 visa program also includes 10 other categories that don't involve work, such as those for college students, which aren't under review, people familiar with the talks said.

The visa was instituted by statute, but the individual categories were created by past administrations and could be changed or eliminated by executive action. Some changes might need to go through the regulatory process, which provides an opportunity for public comment.

Options on the table include eliminating these visa classes, as well as imposing new requirements on participants. For instance, employers could be required to show that they couldn't find Americans for these jobs, as is required for other visa programs, according to the people who are tracking the internal debate.

A recent directive to the agency at the State Department responsible for these programs instructs officials to rewrite regulations in a way that would effectively end these five categories of the J-1 visa program, according to an administration official. It was unclear whether the intent was to move forward with such a regulation or if the request was aimed at facilitating internal discussion.

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A State Department official declined to comment on the debate and referred questions to the White House. "Presently, we continue to implement the J-1 visa programs at the same levels we have for the past few years, and we appreciate the support that American businesses have shown for the program and its value to their local communities," the official said.

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said she had "nothing to announce at this time."

Supporters view these programs as facilitating cross-cultural exchanges while filling gaps in the U.S. labor market. They give young people from foreign countries the opportunity to come to the U.S. and gain exposure to American culture and values before returning home.

This month, a bipartisan group of 17 senators wrote Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to express support for the summer work travel program as helpful to both the students and the businesses that use them for seasonal labor needs. A similar letter came in July from 33 members of the House.

"This public diplomacy program has a long track record of success, providing an enriching exchange experience to a diverse pool of college and university students across the globe, including countries key to U.S. national security interests," the senators wrote.

The program also fills the need for summer workers, said Denise Beckson, director of human resources at Morey's Piers, which operates amusement park rides and restaurants in Wildwood, N.J. The company has 1,500 summer workers, including 550 from the J-1 program.

"They allow us to have the types of hours and provide the offerings that guests coming for their summer vacation expect to have," she said. The company hosts such events as country-western night and "Thanksgiving in July."

Workers have their home countries on their nametags, she said, prompting conversation with customers.

Critics say foreign workers are a source of cheap labor who create unfair competition for American workers. Critics include conservatives such as Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who want to restrict immigration but also some liberals who worry about the impact on U.S. workers. Sen. Bernie Sanders (I., Vt.), for instance, singled out the J-1 program for criticism during the 2013 Senate debate over sweeping immigration legislation.

"The J-1 program for foreign college students is supposed to be used as a cultural exchange program, a program to bring young people into this country to learn about our customs and to support international cooperation and understanding," he said on the Senate floor during a 2013 immigration debate. "But instead of doing that, this program has morphed...into a low-wage jobs program to allow corporations...to replace young American workers with cheaper labor from overseas."

Supporters of the program plan to mobilize their backers in hopes of blocking changes they see as harmful, said Ilir Zherka, executive director of the Alliance for International Exchange, which represents organizations that sponsor these programs.

"These exchange programs enjoy wide support in the House and Senate, among Republicans and Democrats," he said. "The reason some in the administration have kept this quiet is they understand this is true. Our job is to make sure our supporters are aware of what's happening and they get engaged."

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