

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS AND COMMONLY MISUNDERSTOOD ISSUES CONCERNING CULTURAL EXCHANGE VISITORS

## PARTICIPANT PROGRAM PLACEMENT

### 1. Who is responsible for international counselors to the US government – the camp where participants placed or their visa sponsoring agency?

The BridgeUSA visa sponsor is primarily responsible to the US government for the participant's health, safety, and well-being as well as overall program operations. However, full cooperation and support of the camp is essential in order to do this well. The camp is expected to adhere to all program regulations and other terms and conditions outlined in the agreement with the visa sponsoring agency. The visa sponsor may or may not be the camp's recruitment agency but will be working directly with your recruitment agency if they are not one and the same.

### 2. What is the difference between a “recruitment agency” and a “visa sponsor”?

A visa sponsor is an organization that has been designated by the US Department of State to operate BridgeUSA J-1 Cultural Exchange Programs. Recruitment agencies are typically not actual visa sponsors. They are sometimes partners that work with the designated sponsor to support the program.

### 3. Should the camp or the visa sponsor agency conduct in-depth orientations to prepare the cultural exchange visitor for camp and for the US culture?

Both. The visa sponsoring agency should prepare all participants for American culture and camp life in general and the camp should prepare the participant for the specifics of that camp, as well as supporting them through cultural adjustment during the summer.

### 4. What details might be found in a sponsor agency agreement with a camp?

Each visa sponsoring agency has its own agreement and procedures for business and participant support. Camps need to be aware of what is in each agreement and be prepared to work with the agency in all ways defined.

### 5. How do visa sponsor agencies monitor and evaluate the camp experience?

Each agency has its own method of evaluating the camp experience that might include visits to camps as well as surveys of camps and participants. The US Department of State also monitors and evaluates the camp experience through a visa participant hotline and evaluation – as well as visits to camps.

### 6. Whose responsibility is it to be sure the participant arrives at camp on time?

The camp needs to alert the visa sponsor agency and the participant of the expected arrival time and arrival protocol. The sponsor agency and camp are then responsible for helping a participant make the required arrangement for travel.

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### 7. Can a 55-year-old individual apply to the camp counselor program?

Yes – there is no upward age limit. However, a 55-year-old individual usually cannot apply to the Summer Work Travel Program that provides support staff for camp. Summer Work Travel participants must be full-time students.

### 8. Can I switch a counselor over to work in the kitchen midsummer?

No. You cannot switch participants between support staff and counselor positions. Each program has its own visa requirements that must be maintained.

### 9. Why can't an applicant originating in New Zealand take a position as a prep cook?

Summer Work Travel visas (support staff) are only granted during time off from educational studies. Southern hemisphere participants are in educational studies during the American summer.

### 10. What types of criminal convictions could preclude an applicant from obtaining a BridgeUSA J-1 Visa?

Almost anything. BridgeUSA J-1 Visa participants must complete a background check for camp placement and also often for issuing of a visa.

### 11. Should I request a background check on my participant before placement and what happens if I get back negative information?

Yes, you should request the best background check available in the country of origin on each participant each year. This request should be made to your visa sponsor agency. You should have already established a threshold for your American staff in case of negative background information, so you should use the same threshold for international participants.

### 12. As I consider applications from various agencies, how can I make sure that I am being fair to the applicants?

Choose your cultural exchange visitors based on the qualifications and skills needed to be successful in your camp. Interview the potential participant by yourself. Honor the visa sponsor agency agreements when the participant is placed.

### 13. What safeguards can I put in place to minimize the number of cancellations I get from my cultural exchange visitors?

Choose your cultural exchange visitors early to allow ample time for visa processing. Maintain good communication with them and their visa sponsoring agency throughout the time they and you are preparing for camp. Put them in contact with other staff coming to your camp – both American and international. Utilize your international alumni as a resource to help support your new international counselors.

### 14. When reviewing health records for my cultural exchange visitors, what if I discover evidence of a condition such as severe depression or other mental health challenges?

Each camp should have a predetermined plan on what type of medical conditions it will be able to accommodate from any camp staff. Review your staff medical forms as early as possible to determine any indication of conditions that would not fit your requirements. Contact your sponsor agency ASAP if a cultural exchange visitor has such a condition.

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## COMPLIANCE/REGULATORY ISSUES

### 1. What is SEVIS?

Student and Exchange Visitor Information System. This system is used by the US Immigration and Naturalization Service to track and monitor the whereabouts of all non-immigrant F, M, and J Visa student and exchange visitors. All BridgeUSA J-1 participants are required to register with SEVIS upon arrival.

### 2. What is the maximum legal length of time a camp counselor can be in the US? Can we extend the visa of my visitors? Can we change the visa status?

Camp counselors can participate in up to a four-month program followed by a four-week travel period in the United States. BridgeUSA J-1 Visa Counselor and Summer Work Travel are non-extendable. Participants can arrive between May 1 and September 21 as specified by the US Department of State.

### 3. Can support staff work at another job in town when not working at camp?

Support staff (Summer Work Travel staff) can work in a similar position in town after the commitment to the camp is completed but only with permission of the visa sponsor agency.

### 4. Is it OK for my cultural exchange visitors to travel to Mexico or Canada on their time off?

Yes, as long as they have a multiple-entry visa. They must take their passport and form DS 2019 with them. The DS 2019 must be signed by the visa sponsor agency. Participants must contact the Embassy of Canada or Mexico to be sure their nationality does not need a visa entry to those countries.

### 5. Do I have to put my cultural exchange visitors on payroll? Do they pay taxes?

The Internal Revenue Service considers your cultural exchange visitors as employees. You need to treat them as such, including withholding of taxes. The majority of J-1 visa holders are nonresident aliens for tax purposes. Participants should not pay FICA, FUTA, and Social Security taxes unless they are considered a resident alien for tax purposes. Participants can apply to get a refund for taxes withheld. Check with your visa sponsor for any visitors from countries that have a tax treaty with the United States such as Canada. These participants pay taxes in their home country.

### 6. Can cultural exchange visitors work as nannies for camp staff's children over the summer? Can they work in my home to clean and look after my kids?

No — participants in the Camp Counselor or Summer Work Travel programs cannot work as nannies, clean your home, or look after your kids. They also cannot work as nurses, nurse's aides, drivers, or night watchmen.

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## COMPLIANCE/REGULATORY ISSUES

### 7. What do we do if we are waiting for a social security number to arrive, but we still want to pay our participant?

You can get a memo from your social security office that the social security number has been applied for. You should enter 999999999 in the payroll system until the card arrives. You can also get a waiver form for the visitor to sign that gives permission to get the number from social security before receiving the actual card.

### 8. Could someone other than my sponsor agency try to make personal contact with my participant during the camp season?

Yes — if your visa sponsor and recruitment agency are not the same. A representative from the visa sponsor must make contact with your participant in order to satisfy State Department monitoring procedures. The State Department could also contact your participant directly.

### 9. Could the State Department contact my camp directly about our participation in the BridgeUSA J-1 Visa Program?

Yes. The State Department makes visits to camps (and other employers) to verify working and housing conditions, and to interview international participants. Contact your sponsor agency if you get a call or visit from the State Department. Visits are usually random, so you should not assume that there is anything “wrong.”

### 10. Can my cultural exchange visitor contact the State Department directly?

Yes. Your visitor has received information on how to contact the State Department through a hotline if needed.

### 11. Are my Summer Work Travel participants subject to the same wage and hour laws as my American staff?

Yes. Be sure you are documenting their hours.

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## CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE

### 1. Could my visitors consider “time” differently than my camp expects?

Many countries view time as more laid back that depends little on a clock. Be sure your international participants understand what is required of them regarding timeliness.

### 2. What message might be given in some cultures if a female makes eye contact with a male? What about if a child makes eye contact with an adult?

In many cultures, if a female makes eye contact with a male, she is perceived as flirting. In two-thirds of the countries in the world, eye contact is perceived very differently than in the United States. In many countries, making eye contact is a sign of disrespect, especially between child and adult or adult and someone in authority.

### 3. What issues about personal space impact the adjustment to camp life? What about theories of discipline of campers?

In many cultures, personal space is “closer” than in the US. Participants from these countries may be perceived as getting in the face of others while inadvertently invading personal space. Some cultures believe in corporal punishment for children. Others believe in a form of public punishment that might be perceived in the US as public humiliation. Be sure your international participants understand your camp’s culture and the laws in the US.

### 4. What is our obligation to ensure that “cultural exchange” is being experienced by the participant?

The BridgeUSA J-1 Visa Program is, at its core, a program of cultural exchange. It is not a “job placement” or guest worker program. The State Department requires that all international participants in the Summer Work Travel Program (support staff) engage in cultural exchange activities that are not a part of their regular job, including activities out of camp and within the community. In addition, while the State Department has not addressed this issue with regard to BridgeUSA J-1 Visa Camp Counselors yet, you should assume that the same requirement applies. ACA recommends including all of your cultural exchange visitors in these activities. You will need to provide documentation of these cultural exchange activities to your sponsor agency. Work with your sponsor agency to develop a plan for your participants.

## SUPPORT FOR PARTICIPANT AND CAMP

### 1. What is a camp's responsibility, if any, if the following situations arise: homesickness, health issues, emergencies at camp or at home, arrests, dismissal, death?

The camp should notify the sponsor agency immediately and should provide the same support for the participant as it would with any other staff member.

### 2. How are financial obligations determined if a participant leaves the program early?

Consult your agreement with the sponsor agency to understand financial obligations due to early program departure.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- For additional information about international cultural exchange issues, refer to: Best Practices For International Staff in American Camp Association Camps [ACAcamps.org/resource-library/public-policy/international-staff-best-practices](https://www.acacamps.org/resource-library/public-policy/international-staff-best-practices)
- For information about international sponsor agencies, contact any of the ACA Business Affiliates that specialize in international exchange visitor recruitment and selection
  - [ACAcamps.org/buyers-guide](https://www.acacamps.org/buyers-guide)
  - [j1visa.state.gov/participants/how-to-apply/sponsor-search/?program=Camp%20Counselor](https://j1visa.state.gov/participants/how-to-apply/sponsor-search/?program=Camp%20Counselor)
- For information about the BridgeUSA J-1 Visa Program, contact the Department of State [j1visa.state.gov](https://j1visa.state.gov)