



As we close out the first month of the year, CIEE’s Government Affairs and Advocacy team would like to thank you for your commitment to international exchange and for championing key initiatives like the U.S. Department of State’s BridgeUSA program. For a deeper dive into the history of BridgeUSA, tune into [“The Truth with Rick Ruth”](#), a new entertaining and informational Spotify podcast from our partners at the Coalition for American Public Diplomacy and Leadership ([CAPDL](#)).

CIEE's BridgeUSA Celebration Tour 2026

To kick off 2026, CIEE’s one-of-a-kind [BridgeUSA Celebration Tour](#) will travel to the picturesque ski destination of Park City, Utah in March. While the Celebration Tour is underway, CIEE will host the Young Civic Leadership Summit (YCLS) in Salt Lake City. Together both events celebrate the transformative power of BridgeUSA, while honoring its local leaders and champions – community and business leaders, dedicated sponsors, and hardworking participants.

This marks the second time the BridgeUSA Celebration Tour and YCLS have come together. Relive last summer’s joint event in [Myrtle Beach with our Celebration Tour Recap video](#).

J-1 Visa Appointment Delays and Approval Rates

As the BridgeUSA community – participants, international representatives, hosts, and CIEE – works to bring students to the United States, CIEE recognizes the current challenges many stakeholders are experiencing with visa processing at U.S. embassies and consulates. With major events like the FIFA World Cup 2026 and America’s 250th celebrations occurring in the U.S this summer, J-1 visa appointments may become more limited and processing times may be longer than in previous years, especially in light of the enhanced social media vetting guidelines.

CIEE is collaborating closely with the U.S. Department of State for guidance. Furthermore, we are engaging with Congressional members and staff to: bolster support for the BridgeUSA program, emphasize the significant operational support that program participants provide to host businesses across the country, and advocate for consistent embassy staffing and expanded winter J-1 visa appointment availability for Summer Work Travel.

For inquiries, concerns, or helpful insights, please contact your CIEE Sales Manager or your CIEE Accounts Manager. You can monitor visa appointment wait times through the U.S. Department of State’s Global Visa Appointment Wait Times [website](#).

Nonimmigrant Visa Applications in a Third Country

In 2025, the Department of State issued [guidance](#) affecting third-country visa applicants.

Nonimmigrant visa applicants are now required to schedule in-person interview appointments at the U.S. embassy or consulate in their country of nationality or residence. If applying based on residency, the applicant must be able to demonstrate their residence in the country where they are applying.

The [U.S. Department of State's "Student Visa" page](#) advises that applicants who choose to schedule nonimmigrant visa interviews outside of their home country or residence are likely to find it more difficult to qualify for a visa and may experience longer wait times. Additionally, once paid, visa application fees are nonrefundable and nontransferable.

Nationals of countries where the U.S. does not conduct routine nonimmigrant visa operations must apply at the designated embassy or consulate unless their residence is elsewhere. These countries are Afghanistan, Belarus, Chad, Cuba, Haiti, Iran, Libya, Niger, Russia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Venezuela, Yemen, and Zimbabwe. You can find the designated embassy or consulate via the [U.S. embassy and consulate directory](#).

U.S. Travel Restrictions

In mid-December, President Trump issued a [Presidential Proclamation](#) that added 20 nations to the list of countries subject to full or partial travel restrictions to the United States. These restrictions, effective January 1, are for nationals outside of the U.S. without valid visas. Participants from the designated nations who have a valid visa but have not yet entered the U.S. may be denied entry at the border.

The full entry restrictions prohibit entry for both immigrants and nonimmigrants. The partial entry bans prohibit entry for immigrants and for nonimmigrants who are using B (1,2), F, M and J visas from 19 countries. For Turkmenistan, entry is suspended for immigrants only.

In finalizing the list of restricted countries, the Administration assessed visa overstay rates, each nation's screening and vetting capabilities, information-sharing policies, and country-specific risk factors. The list of restricted countries will be reviewed continually to determine whether these suspensions and limitations should be modified.

U.S. Fiscal Year 2026 Budget

During the week of January 12, the U.S. House of Representatives passed six Fiscal Year 2026 (FY26) funding measures, including the U.S. Department of State's budget, to keep the federal government funded through September 30th and avoid another government shutdown. The U.S. Senate must pass these six bills by 12:01 am on January 30th to prevent another shutdown just months after the 43-day record-setting shutdown in November 2025.

The spending bill to fund the Department of State ([H.R. 7006](#)) would support the Department's operations through September 30th. Under the House bill, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Exchange Programs would receive US\$667 million, including US\$273.4 million for the Fulbright Program, US\$99.75 million for the International Visitor Leadership Program, US\$35.6 million for the Young Leaders Initiatives, and US\$16.15 million for the Gilman International Scholarship Program.

Other noteworthy provisions include:

- Visa Wait Times: US\$513 million would be allocated for Consular and Border Security Programs, including efforts to reduce passport backlogs and visa wait times. Updates from the State Department to the U.S. House on visa wait times would need to address the impact of new vetting procedures, fraud prevention, security safeguards, the cost of visa operations, and how the Department prioritizes resources for posts with long visa wait times.
- Exchange Visitor Program: This provision would prohibit changes to Exchange Visitor Program funding without going through the formal Congressional rulemaking process.

In early January, Congress also passed six other FY26 funding bills covering several federal agencies, including Interior, Commerce, Justice, and Agriculture. These agencies will remain open and funded through September 30. However, agencies whose FY26 budgets are yet to be enacted, including the U.S. Department of State, are at risk of a shutdown if the Senate does not approve their funding by January 30. During any full or partial government shutdown, nonessential government functions pause while essential workers continue to work without pay.

Other Points of Interest

- Celebrate America’s 250th anniversary this year with CIEE and our new partner, the [America250 initiative](#). More details are coming soon!
- Stay connected by following [CIEE on LinkedIn](#) for the latest updates on the 2026 Celebration Tour destinations and other notable CIEE news.
- Interested in BridgeUSA best practices and educational webinars? Get involved with [CAPDL](#)!
 - CAPDL will host a free in-person [BridgeUSA Workshop](#) in Atlanta, Georgia, on February 11.
 - Check out “[The Truth with Rick Ruth](#)”, a new informational CAPDL podcast.

CIEE thanks you for your ongoing support and advocacy. For any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to reach out to your CIEE point of contact.

Questions? Contact [Asenith Dixon Bell](#).

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