



This March newsletter highlights the continued negotiations to fund the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and addresses ongoing reductions in visa appointment availability. As always, thank you for your support of the BridgeUSA program.

U.S. Department of Homeland Security and Travel Delays

We are closing out week six of U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) operational shutdowns and related service delays. At this time, the DHS' Transportation Security Administration (TSA) personnel have gone unpaid for a month, leading to increasing numbers of resignations. This rapidly changing staffing situation has created unprecedented travel challenges at U.S. airports. As a result, many travelers entering and leaving the U.S. should expect flight delays, longer wait times, customs and border entry slowdowns, and other travel-related service disruptions.

As of Friday, March 27, the [U.S. Senate passed legislation](#) that would fund most of DHS, except for Immigration and Citizenship Enforcement and Customs Enforcement and Border Patrol, through August 30, 2026. The Senate legislation would fund TSA, with the hope of reducing travel delays and long wait times at U.S. airports.

The Senate legislation has moved to the U.S. House of Representatives for consideration. Although Congress is scheduled for a two-week recess beginning Monday, March 30, members of the House will remain in Washington, D.C. for votes on DHS funding. If a funding agreement is not reached, this partial shutdown would become the longest partial shutdown of a federal agency in American history.

Though, the BridgeUSA program – managed by the U.S. Department of State – relies on DHS staff for the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), U.S. port of entry and exit checks, visa/passport control, and visa enforcement, these services continue to operate. However, some service disruptions or delays are expected as the current state of affairs evolves.

Advocacy Letters – J-1 Visa Appointment Reductions

Despite ongoing challenges affecting BridgeUSA participant recruitment and J-1 visa approval, the international exchange community continues to plan for BridgeUSA participation throughout the summer months in the U.S. To reduce headwinds, CIEE encouraged American hosts to send advocacy letters to their respective Congressional leaders. The letters petitioned Congress to work with the Department of State to add embassy staff dedicated to social media vetting and to prioritize visa appointments for J-1 visa applicants.

Thank you to everyone who submitted advocacy letters. Your efforts help to keep the BridgeUSA program and other international exchange programs at top of mind for decisionmakers. In fact, your actions prompted a number of Members of Congress to write [a letter](#), to Secretary of State Rubio, in support of BridgeUSA and international exchange programs.

The March 19 letter emphasizes that BridgeUSA programs are essential to local economies, U.S. foreign policy, and the success of major upcoming events such as the FIFA World Cup and America's 250th anniversary. The letter goes on to say, "With sufficient consular capacity in place, in the form of additional consular officers and appointment availability, the United States can both meet the extraordinary travel demand of the World Cup and reaffirm its longstanding commitment to these vital international exchange programs during this pivotal year."

Celebrate America's 250th Anniversary

This month, [CIEE announced its supporting partnership with America250](#), the national nonpartisan organization charged by Congress to lead celebrations for the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Throughout 2026, CIEE will spotlight America250 events and projects that inspire national reflection and civic engagement.

In particular, CIEE is embracing the [America Gives](#) initiative, which challenges organizations to increase their level of community service and volunteerism. America Gives dovetails closely with CIEE's recently launched [Community Impact Initiative](#), adding robust and locally-grounded community service to all of CIEE's international exchange and study abroad programs.

CIEE's BridgeUSA Celebration Tour 2026

In early March, CIEE's [BridgeUSA Celebration Tour](#) traveled to the picturesque ski destination of Park City, Utah, showcasing the many ways that BridgeUSA positively impacts local communities. As U.S. Department of State Deputy Assistant Secretary for Private Sector Exchange Rebecca Pasini noted, "BridgeUSA... is a powerful engine for pro-U.S. diplomacy that delivers measurable benefits at the local level."

The success of BridgeUSA depends on champions at every level – dedicated community and business leaders, strong BridgeUSA sponsors, and hardworking participants. CIEE proudly recognized several of these exemplary community leaders in Park City with the [2026 BridgeUSA Champion Awards](#).

CIEE's First Ever Winter Young Civic Leadership Summit in Salt Lake City

For the first time, the Young Civic Leadership Summit (YCLS) held a [Winter Summit](#) in Salt Lake City. The Summit brought together 30 Fellows from six countries who worked with 25 U.S. host employers through the BridgeUSA Summer Work Travel program. The YCLS program has produced over 550 alumni leaders worldwide and, in 2025, began incorporating a community service project during each Summit.

As CIEE President and CEO Jim Pellow noted, "The [Young Civic Leadership Summit](#) is the essence of the CIEE mission. We were founded to build bridges between young people around the world...The Young Civic Leadership Fellowship program builds a network of global leaders who can bridge cultural and national differences. Fellows return home ready to advance peace and collaborate on solutions to global challenges."

Relive this winter's YCLS through the participants' reflections in this [YCLS Recap](#).

Consular Service Reductions at U.S. Embassies

Given the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, we understand that returning and new participants may have concerns. Please continue to monitor travel advisories and consular services information shared by local embassies for the most accurate and latest details in your city and country.

We remain confident in the safety and security of welcoming BridgeUSA participants. Participant well-being is extremely important to CIEE, and we will continue to monitor official guidance from the U.S. Department of State and other federal agencies closely.

Other Points of Interest

- ECA's [BridgeUSA Facts and Figures](#) updated for 2024 and 2025 program participation.
- Get involved with the Coalition for American Public Diplomacy and Leadership ([CAPDL](#))! Learn more about BridgeUSA best practices and connect with the worldwide BridgeUSA community.
 - Check out March's "[The Truth with Rick Ruth](#)" podcast. This month's episode is about dispelling the myth that BridgeUSA programs take job opportunities away from Americans.

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.