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U.S. Takes Close Look At J-1 Visas

By Justin Lifflander

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The process by which Russian students get summer work visas to the United States will be improved and tightened in an effort to eliminate criminal abuse, U.S. Ambassador John Beyrle said Tuesday.

"We are working very, very hard to put in place a system of procedures that will make it impossible for anyone to take advantage of students," Beyrle told The Moscow Times.

This summer, about 30,000 J-1 visas were issued to Russians, the majority of which were for the summer work-travel program, said embassy spokesman David Siefkin.

The program allows more than 100,000 college students from around the world to experience America, while employers — especially in the hospitality and recreation sectors — get a chance to hire inexpensive help for the peak summer season. Students usually make minimum wage and have to supply their own health insurance, while employers don't have to pay pension or unemployment taxes.

Brokers, who frequently are from the students' home countries, recruit for employers and organize housing for the students. These middlemen sometimes abuse the young people via exorbitant salary deductions, providing substandard housing, and in some cases even forcing them to work in strip clubs, according to an Associated Press investigation published Sunday. Government regulations ban students from taking jobs that "might bring the Department of State into notoriety or disrepute," the report said.

The State Department only started to keep a database of complaints this year.

The new process, which Beyrle said should be functional in time for next summer's cycle of J-1 applicants, "will make sure everyone is matched up with a job and that each job is backed up by a reputable employer," though as a result the total number of visas issued may go down.

Beyrle thinks that the program brings more than just financial benefits to both sides.

"It also exposes Americans to Russians in an very informal kind of diplomacy, which I think is very good," he said.

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