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A Few Minutes with Ilir Zherka of the Alliance for International Exchange

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Note from the CPD Blog Manager: *The following is a CPD interview with Ilir Zherka, Executive Director of the Alliance for International Exchange, in response to recent visa restrictions in the U.S. Zherka is a longtime civil and human rights leader who has testified before Congress and is author of* Winning the Inside Game: The Handbook of Advocacy Strategies*. The Alliance serves as a collective public policy voice for the exchange community.*

On June 22, President Trump signed an executive order to extend work visa suspensions. How does this set of visa restrictions impact exchange programs?

The proclamation suspends six international exchange programs: intern, trainee, teacher, camp counselor, au pair, and summer work travel. These programs make up the bulk of the privately funded international exchange programs and are the core of our people-to-people diplomacy efforts.

What might be the longer-term implications of such policies on international exchange?

The impact could be devastating. The pandemic cut short the spring programs and has sharply curtailed summer programs. If the proclamation isn't modified, it will erase the fall season and could impact the winter season as well. Many exchange sponsors would find it very difficult to sustain losses of this magnitude, and a whole class of international participants may never experience exchange in the United States.

What have been the greatest challenges in sustaining and promoting international exchange during these uncertain times? What might the future hold?

The impact on the exchange community from the pandemic alone is projected to result in losses to our economy of more than $233 million and nearly 7,000 jobs in the field of international exchange.

The greatest challenge will be to keep the organizations that facilitate exchanges running. As the world opens up again, exchanges will be critically important in facilitating mutual understanding. The future of exchange will be innovative and adaptive. Our members are increasing virtual and domestic exchanges. They are also prepared to restart traditional exchanges with the health and safety of all involved as the top priority.

What are the next steps in advocacy for the Alliance for International Exchange?

At the Alliance, we are taking a multifaceted advocacy approach. We have a public letter-writing campaign that can be accessed here. We are continuing to inform key policymakers in the administration, members of Congress and embassies of the importance of these programs. We will enable to stakeholders to get involved through updates on our website and Twitter.