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State Department Ends Pandemic-Era Visa Waiver Program, Mandates In-Person Interviews Worldwide

Starting September 2, 2025, nearly all nonimmigrant visa applicants—including children, seniors, students, and workers—must appear in person. Officials say the change strengthens security, but universities and tech firms fear severe delays.

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The U.S. Department of State has significantly curtailed the nonimmigrant visa interview waiver program, effective September 2, 2025, requiring most applicants—including children, senior citizens, foreign workers, and students—to attend in-person interviews at U.S. embassies or consulates.

The policy shift, detailed in updates from the Bureau of Consular Affairs, reverses pandemic-era expansions that allowed certain applicants to renew visas like B-1/B-2 (tourist/business), F-1 (student), H-1B (specialty occupation), and others via mail or “dropbox” without appearing in person. The change aims to enhance national security through thorough vetting, but it has sparked concerns about longer wait times and logistical challenges for applicants worldwide. The decision aligns with the Trump administration’s broader focus on stricter immigration enforcement, though officials emphasize it targets procedural efficiency rather than specific groups.

The interview waiver program, expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic to reduce backlogs and in-person contact, previously allowed exemptions for applicants under 14, over 79, or renewing visas in the same category within 12 to 48 months, provided they met criteria like no prior refusals.

According to the State Department’s September 18, 2025, guidance, these flexibilities have been largely eliminated, with the policy now stating that “all nonimmigrant visa applicants, including those under age 14 or over age 79, will generally require an in-person interview” unless qualifying for narrow exemptions, such as diplomatic visas (A, G, NATO series). Limited waivers persist for specific cases, like B-1/B-2 renewals expiring within 12 months and certain H-2A agricultural worker renewals, but only if applicants pass security checks and have prior biometric enrollment.

For children and senior citizens, the change marks a significant departure. Previously, those under 14 or over 79 were routinely exempt to accommodate their vulnerabilities, particularly for tourist or dependent visas like F-2 or J-2. Now, even young children accompanying student or worker parents, or elderly applicants seeking to visit family, must generally appear in person, a requirement the State Department justifies as necessary for consistent vetting.

Foreign workers, including those on H-1B or L-1 visas, face similar hurdles, with renewals no longer eligible for waivers unless meeting stringent conditions. Students on F-1 or J-1 visas, critical to U.S. universities, must also attend interviews, raising concerns about delays as consular posts manage increased demand. The State Department advises applicants to check local embassy websites for appointment availability, noting potential backlogs.

The policy’s rationale, articulated in a State Department press release, centers on strengthening security and ensuring compliance with immigration laws. “In-person interviews allow consular officers to verify identities, assess eligibility, and detect potential fraud,” the release states, emphasizing the need to balance accessibility with national interests.

The rollback builds on earlier adjustments, including a February 2025 update that limited waivers to renewals within 12 months, and follows the administration’s broader immigration agenda, such as the \$100,000 H-1B fee introduced on September 19, 2025. While not explicitly linked, the waiver restrictions complement efforts to scrutinize nonimmigrant programs, with officials citing cases of visa overstays or fraudulent applications as justification for heightened oversight.

The change has drawn mixed reactions. Universities and tech companies, reliant on international students and workers, have expressed alarm over potential disruptions. The American Council on Education noted that F-1 visa delays could impact fall 2026 enrollment, while tech firms like Microsoft, which secured over 5,000 H-1B approvals in 2025, warned of operational challenges. Conversely, some immigration reform advocates argue the policy ensures fairness by preventing abuse of streamlined processes. Consular posts are bracing for a surge, with wait times in high-volume countries like India and China already stretching to 90 days for some categories, per USCIS data. The State Department has pledged to increase staffing and streamline scheduling to

mitigate delays, though no timeline for relief was provided.

The State Department encourages early applications and advises checking travel.state.gov for updates, as local conditions may vary.

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