



HIGH SCHOOL EXCHANGE VISITOR PROGRAM  
(J-1 VISA PROGRAM)

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **OF THE**

### USIA EVALUATION **OF THE USE OF** *ARRIVAL HOST FAMILIES*

Submitted to:

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by  
**Carlyn Consulting**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### ***USIA EVALUATION OF THE USE OF ARRIVAL HOST FAMILIES***

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In early 1998, the United States Information Agency (USIA)<sup>1</sup> initiated a one-time evaluation of the use of arrival host families by high school exchange programs participating in the Exchange Visitor (J-Visa) Program. The evaluation was conducted during the 1998-99 academic year by Carlyn Consulting, an independent contractor competitively selected by USIA. The purpose of the study was to assess the extent to which arrival host families are being used and the impact on international high school students who are brought to the United States by private exchange organizations to attend high school for an academic year while living with an American family. *The study found no evidence that students placed in permanent host families have a more successful (or less successful) exchange experience than students placed in arrival host families.*

#### **NEED FOR AN EVALUATION**

The use of arrival host families by USIA-designated high school program sponsors has been a long-standing issue and concern for both USIA and the high school exchange community. Over the last decade, there has been a steady rise in the number of international students interested in coming to the United States on a high school exchange program and a simultaneous decline in the number of American families willing to host an exchange student for an entire academic year. This “supply and demand” problem has led many USIA-designated high school program sponsors to place a small percentage of their exchange students with *arrival host families* (AHFs) for a short period of time until *permanent host families* (PHFs) can be secured. Arrival host families (often referred to as “welcome families” or “short-term families”) offer program sponsors additional flexibility, permitting them to bring more students to this country and increase the number of American families involved in international exchange programs. However, USIA has been concerned that this practice might endanger the safety and well-being of the students placed in arrival host families or compromise the quality of their exchange experience.

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<sup>1</sup> On October 1, 1999, during the writing of the report on this evaluation, USIA merged with the U.S. Department of State pursuant to the Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1998. The USIA-designated high school program sponsors, and the USIA offices overseeing the program and the evaluation study, were not altered by the merger. To maintain consistency in terminology, references to USIA (rather than the Department of State) are used throughout the Executive Summary.

The use of arrival host families is not explicitly prohibited or permitted in the current USIA regulations, and there have been reports of confusion and inconsistent program administration among program sponsors with respect to the use of arrival host families. In addition, difficulties have been experienced by USIA in this area in its administration and oversight of the USIA-designated high school programs (hereafter referred to as the “High School Exchange Visitor Program”). As a result, USIA decided to sponsor a one-time study for the purpose of securing objective data regarding the use of arrival host families and the impact on high school exchange students so that an informed resolution to the issue could be achieved.

## **STUDY DESIGN**

The *USIA Evaluation of the Use of Arrival Host Families* was collaboratively designed by the USIA Office of Policy and Evaluation (E/Z), the USIA Office of the General Counsel (GC), the USIA Exchange Visitor Program Services Office (GC/V), Carlyn Consulting, the Alliance for International Educational and Cultural Exchange (the Alliance), and the Council on Standards for International Educational Travel (CSIET). E/Z had responsibility for project management and oversight, but was not involved in the day-to-day operations of the study in order to maintain objectivity and ensure the confidentiality of the participants.

The target population for the study consisted of the 21,010 students participating in the High School Exchange Visitor Program for the 1998-99 academic year whose sponsor programs used both arrival and permanent host families. Nearly all (27 out of 28) of the USIA-designated high school program sponsors that reported using both arrival and permanent host families participated in the evaluation. The study focused on 3,035 exchange students who were randomly selected from the target population, using a sampling plan that ensured that students sponsored by each of the 27 participating organizations were included in all of the analyses.

The primary data collection strategy for answering the study questions was a set of survey questionnaires mailed in three waves – during the fall, winter, and spring – to a stratified random sample of AHF and PHF exchange students and their current host families. Survey questionnaires were also mailed during the winter to the students’ high school officials and local program representatives. Additional information was collected from quarterly Student Tracking Reports provided by the participating program sponsors, targeted telephone interviews, early termination and withdrawal notices, and formal complaints reported to USIA.

Over 12,000 completed questionnaires were returned by the sampled exchange students and their host families, high school officials, and local representatives, representing an overall average response rate of 68% per mailing (wave). The response rates varied for the different types of respondents, as shown below:

| <b>Type of Respondent</b> | <b>Average Response Rate</b> |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| Exchange students         | 70%                          |
| Host families             | 67%                          |
| High school officials     | 63%                          |
| Local representatives     | 65%                          |
| <b>Overall</b>            | <b>68%</b>                   |

Altogether, at least one questionnaire was returned for over 98% of the students in the two primary sample groups, and over 90% had at least three questionnaires returned. The unexpectedly high response rates and extensive comments submitted by the respondents provided an abundance of data useful to the evaluation.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

The evaluation was based on a conceptual framework<sup>2</sup> of specific student and host family characteristics and sponsor activities that were hypothesized by the design team to be predictive of a successful exchange experience. Seven study questions were addressed using standard statistical procedures to draw conclusions regarding the practice of using arrival host families. A table summarizing the findings for each question is presented on the following page.

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<sup>2</sup> See the Conceptual Framework for the *USIA Evaluation of the Use of Arrival Host Families* at the end of the Executive Summary.

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## FINDINGS FOR THE STUDY QUESTIONS

| Study Question   | Findings  |
|--|---|
| 1. On average, what proportion of exchange students are initially placed in arrival host families? What proportion are placed in permanent host families?  | Approximately 14% of exchange students are initially placed in arrival host families and 86% are placed in permanent host families.   |
| 2. What proportion of exchange students transfer to a different family and/or high school during their stay in the United States? Is the proportion higher for students initially placed in arrival host families? | Of the total population of exchange students, approximately 30% transfer to a different family at least once during the year and 7% transfer to a different high school. Of AHF students, 64% change families at least once and 14% change schools. Of PHF students, 24% change families at least once and 6% change schools.   |
| 3. What specific activities implemented by program sponsors are most related to student success?   | The most important sponsor activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing adequate screening of the student prior to the student's arrival in the U.S.</li> <li>• Ensuring that the local representative responds quickly and appropriately to emergency situations and other problems arising during the year.</li> <li>• Providing a suitable orientation to the host family and the exchange student.</li> </ul> |
| 4. What specific student characteristics and initial host family characteristics are most related to student success?  | The most important student/family characteristic: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The initial host family's previous experience hosting an exchange student.</li> </ul>  |
| 5. Are students who are placed in arrival host families generally as successful as students placed in permanent host families, controlling for (holding constant) other factors related to success?                | The study found no significant difference between the success of students placed in arrival host families and the success of similar students placed in permanent host families.  |
| 6. Is there evidence that the use of arrival host families jeopardizes the personal safety and welfare of participating high school exchange students?   | The study found no evidence that the use of arrival host families, in itself, jeopardizes the personal safety and welfare of high school exchange students.   |
| 7. Do students who are placed in arrival host families generate more substantive formal complaints to USIA than students placed in permanent host families?  | The study found no evidence that students placed in arrival host families generate more substantive formal complaints to USIA than students placed in permanent host families.  |

Following the statistical analyses of the study questions, quantitative and qualitative analyses of the questionnaire responses, comments, and telephone interviews were conducted which provided more information on the current use of arrival host families and the impact on exchange students. The results support the following additional conclusions (not listed in order of priority):

- There are many advantages to using arrival host families, such as providing flexibility to sponsors facing logistical problems and permitting them to recruit more families, enabling exchange students to learn more about American families, and allowing additional time for sponsors to achieve a good student-family match.
- Of the 36% of AHF families who ended up hosting their exchange student for the entire year, approximately two-thirds (67%) did so willingly. The remaining one-third (33%) reluctantly agreed to host the student for the full year either because the sponsor was unable to find a permanent host family or because the family thought the student would be very upset moving to another family. It was therefore concluded that approximately one-fourth (24%) of all arrival host families willingly decide to become permanent host families after the student has arrived.
- The use of arrival host families, as currently implemented by many sponsor organizations, creates substantial worry and stress for many exchange students and their host families and is generally less preferable than placing students with permanent host families. Nevertheless, AHF students generally reported that they had a good experience during their first few weeks in the U.S., even if they had difficulties with an AHF placement.
- In many cases, arrival host families do not receive the same screening as permanent host families. The study found that AHF families are less likely than PHF families to complete an application form, provide personal references, and be interviewed in person by the program sponsor prior to the student's arrival. An unexpected finding was that 17-19% of the host families of both AHF and PHF students may not be adequately screened and selected, based on the responses of high school officials.
- AHF families are also less likely than PHF families to be given a copy of the USIA regulations and information about their exchange student before he/she arrives in the U.S. An unexpected finding was that only 48% of the AHF families and only 58% of the PHF families in the study stated that they attended a host family orientation, as required by USIA regulations, and the percentages were even lower for families hosting for the first time.

- With respect to the orientation of exchange students, AHF students are less likely than PHF students to be given an identification card that includes their host family's address and to be given information about their host family before arriving in the United States, including whether the family is an arrival or permanent host family.
- With respect to high school enrollment, AHF students are more likely than PHF students to experience enrollment difficulties, in many cases due to the sponsor's inability to obtain a signed written acceptance to enroll the student prior to the student's arrival.
- When local representatives are supportive of exchange students, responding quickly and appropriately to emergencies and other problems that arise, the students are much more likely to have a successful exchange experience. Even when a student is forced to deal with some very stressful situations, the findings revealed that the strong support of someone outside the family (especially a local representative who is not related to or close friends with the host family and who is actively helping to resolve the problem) has a very positive effect on how the student views the exchange experience and his or her own capabilities.
- The worry and stress associated with many arrival host family placements may become serious if the sponsor does not comply with USIA regulations. For example, when a sponsor has not adequately screened and oriented the arrival family and/or the local representative is not responsive to the problems experienced by the exchange student, the sponsor's additional inability to secure a permanent host family in a reasonable period of time can create a difficult and challenging situation for the student.
- Sponsor noncompliance with USIA regulations was generally higher for AHF students than PHF students during the 1998-99 academic year. It appeared that the primary reason for the disparity between the two groups was that many of the arrival host families were recruited late in the summer and there was inadequate time for the program sponsors to follow standard procedures. Because this type of noncompliance data had never been previously collected by USIA and because many program sponsors reported using arrival host families for the first time in 1998-99, no definitive conclusions could be drawn regarding sponsor noncompliance with USIA regulations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The study found that there are clearly many advantages to using arrival host families. However, there are also a number of problems associated with the practice, primarily due to the way it is currently being implemented by many sponsor organizations. The study findings suggest that if USIA allows program sponsors to use arrival host families, then USIA and the high school exchange community should collaborate on identifying the most effective ways to address the types of problems identified in this study to ensure the best possible experience for all participants.

Accordingly, it is recommended that USIA work collaboratively with members of the exchange community, particularly with representatives of the Alliance and CSIET, to discuss different approaches that could be employed to improve current administrative procedures. Possible strategies include establishing guidelines for program sponsors with respect to the use of arrival host families and/or revising the *USIA Regulations Governing the Exchange Visitor Program* to include language that specifically addresses the practice of using arrival host families.

To assess the extent to which compliance with USIA regulations improves in the future, it is recommended that USIA conduct targeted follow-up studies. These surveys would be narrower in scope than the present study and would focus on particular problems found to be associated with the use of arrival host families, using the results of the present evaluation as baseline data.

The following recommendations for program sponsors are based on the results of the evaluation:

- Sponsors should ensure, whenever possible, that an exchange student is initially placed with a “permanent host family,” defined as a family who has made a commitment to host the student for the student’s entire stay in the United States.
- An alternative (recommended by many respondents) would be for the student to be offered the option of living with two or three “consecutive host families” who have each agreed to host the student for at least three consecutive months during the student’s stay. Under this arrangement, written confirmation (including the agreed-upon hosting schedule) should be secured from all of the consecutive host families prior to the student’s departure from the home country.
- In cases where neither of these arrangements is possible, a student may be placed with an “arrival host family” until a permanent host family or consecutive host families have been selected and oriented.



- The type of initial host family placement (arrival, consecutive, or permanent host family) for each exchange student should be included in the sponsor's Placement Report or on the student's Form IAP-66, along with the name and address of the initial host family.
- All host families (including arrival and consecutive host families) should be selected, screened, and oriented in accordance with the same criteria, as described in the current USIA regulations. Many respondents recommended that family orientations (and also student orientations) include information on the role and responsibilities of the student, the program sponsor, and AHF and PHF families.
- The short-term nature of an arrival or consecutive host family placement should be fully disclosed in advance to the student, his/her natural parents, and the school principal (or his/her designee), and should be acceptable to all of them. Written verification and approval of the host family placement (e.g., a signed document or e-mail message) should be obtained by the sponsor before the student's departure for the United States. Such verification and approval should show that the student and his/her parents have received notification of the arrival or consecutive host family placement, that they understand what it means (including the maximum time the student will live with the initial host family), and that they approve of this arrangement. The name, street address, and phone number of the arrival host family (or each of the consecutive host families) and other information about family members (such as e-mail addresses) should be included in the notification, as well as the name, address, and start date of the high school in which the student has been enrolled.
- Short-term temporary host families may also be used at a later time during the student's stay for emergency situations.

In addition to implementing the above recommendations which specifically address the use of arrival host families, the findings also revealed that there is a definite need for program sponsors to do the following:

- Improve their strategies and procedures for recruiting host families to ensure that more families, including arrival and consecutive host families, are recruited much earlier in the year. There was evidence that many arrival host families are not recruited until July and August. To ensure adequate host family placement for all exchange students, program sponsors may need to accept fewer students.

- Ensure that all exchange students are adequately screened, a function occurring primarily in the students' home countries. In particular, program sponsors should ensure that students have sufficient English language skills to participate fully in the exchange program. To address the need for more adequate screening, sponsors should consider improving their management and communication systems with their foreign affiliates.
- Ensure that all local representatives respond quickly and appropriately to problems that arise during the year. To address this need, sponsors should consider improving their management and communication systems with their local representatives. Specifically, systems should be designed to provide representatives with adequate support for recruiting host families and to monitor the representatives' responsiveness to problems experienced by AHF and PHF students and families.
- Ensure that all exchange students and host families are provided with orientations that are in full compliance with USIA regulations. A thorough explanation of the role and responsibilities of different types of host families (arrival, consecutive, and permanent host families) should be included in the orientations.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, the *USIA Evaluation of the Use of Arrival Host Families* assessed the extent to which arrival families are being used and the impact on high school exchange students. The study found no evidence that the practice of using arrival host families, in itself, jeopardizes the personal safety and welfare of high school exchange students. However, the findings showed that there is a strong need for many program sponsors to improve their current procedures involving the use of arrival host families. In addition to providing USIA with essential information for drawing conclusions on the use of arrival host families, the findings of the evaluation should be useful to a broad spectrum of sponsor organizations, high school officials, host families, exchange students, and other individuals interested in enhancing the High School Exchange Visitor Program.

**To request a copy of the full 323 page report, please contact the Evaluation Division, Office of Policy and Evaluation at (202) 632-6325, or [ECAevaluation@state.gov](mailto:ECAevaluation@state.gov) or by mail at:**

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**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK  
FOR THE  
USIA EVALUATION OF THE USE OF ARRIVAL HOST FAMILIES**

