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Guidance Directive 2009-03

Secondary School Student Program: Host Family Screening and Selection

Recent press coverage has detailed serious incidents involving placement of secondary school students in inappropriate homes. This is particularly troubling, given the Department's efforts to inform and advise the sponsor community of its concern that host family placements are becoming more and more difficult to secure.

The Exchange Visitor Program and its goal of promoting mutual understanding between the people of the United States and other countries and cultures of the world continues to effectively further our Public Diplomacy efforts. President Obama's recent speech in Cairo underscored the importance of this program in establishing and improving global relationships.

To ensure that secondary school students are placed only with carefully screened and selected host families, please note:

- One of the two required host family character references must be from an official in the school that the exchange student will attend. The other reference may not be from a relative, but should be from within the host family's community. See: 58 Fed. Reg. 15180, 15191 (March 19, 1993).
- As family conditions may change, all required screening steps for host families must be repeated each year, even for host families with successful track records. This includes criminal background checks. Employees or agents of sponsors in contact with secondary school students must also repeat their criminal background checks annually.
- Sponsors are encouraged to provide their staff with written instructions on how to evaluate criminal background checks.
- Sponsors must satisfy themselves that potential host families have adequate financial resources to assume the obligations entailed in hosting a student. The host family interview and the home visit are but two means of evaluating this critical factor. Sponsors may wish to establish within their organizations a process to ensure that host families' financial qualifications meet the sponsors' established standard rather than the potentially disparate opinions of their wide-spread field staff on this issue.

- Student placements involving the following (or similar) conditions will not be tolerated, and will give rise, at a minimum, to lesser sanctions:
 - o Subsidized housing, welfare, or sponsor payment to families to host
 - o Condemned, unsafe, or unsanitary homes
 - o Inadequate food, privacy, or supervision
 - o Utilization of students as workers
 - o Intolerance of cultural or religious customs
 - o Falsification of host family screening documentation

The health, safety, and well-being of exchange students is your responsibility and ensuring a successful exchange experience requires that you focus on the quality, not the quantity, of these exchanges. I'm sure you will agree, a single complaint about a mistreated exchange student is one too many.

Stanley S. Colvin
Deputy Assistant Secretary
for Private Sector Exchange