

Navigating the J-1 Visa Waiver Job Search

Powered by the National Recruitment and Retention Network

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About 3RNET

3RNET is the most trusted resource for health professionals seeking careers in rural and underserved communities.

3RNET Mission

3RNET works to improve rural and underserved communities' access to quality health care through recruitment of physicians and other health care professionals, development of community based recruitment and retention activities, and national advocacy relative to rural and underserved health care workforce issues.

3RNET Vision

3RNET is the national leader for community-based health professional recruitment and retention, using interactive technologies and communication.

3RNET.org

Health professionals have trusted 3RNET.org to find jobs across the United States since 1995.

Rural and underserved health care employers' trusted, national platform for promoting their job openings.

3RNET's Network Coordinators

3RNET is powered by the National Rural Recruitment and Retention Network.

3RNET Network Coordinators can guide health professionals through their job search process.

Network Coordinators support employers in rural and underserved communities with hiring and keeping mission-focused health professionals.



About this Guide

This guide is a basic overview of what you should know if you're interested in obtaining a J-1 Visa Waiver.

Trusted, Reliable Information

3RNET and our national network of Coordinators, the National Rural Recruitment and Retention Network, are committed to providing unbiased, reliable information for health professionals.

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This guide was created in a collaborative effort to combine the expertise and industry knowledge of 3RNET's Network Coordinators.

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Understanding the J-1 Visa Waiver Program

Why is a Waiver Needed?

J-1 visa status authorizes an International Medical Graduate (IMG) to do Graduate Medical Education (GME) in the United States.

All J-1 clinical physicians – no exceptions – need to return for two years to their home countries following conclusion of GME.

Unless the two-year home residence obligation is waived, a J-1 physician is ineligible for an H-1B visa and/or permanent residence

Therefore, it is necessary to get a waiver of the two-year home residence obligation in order to get H-1B eligibility which, in turn, is the visa status that will enable an IMG to work as a physician in the United States.

How States Determine Areas of Need

Medically Underserved Areas are defined as Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSA) or Medically Underserved Areas/Populations (MUA/P). HPSAs and MUAs are federal designations used to determine (among other things) where J-1 waivers are applicable.

HPSAFinder: <https://data.hrsa.gov/tools/shortage-area/hpsa-find>

MUAFinder: <https://data.hrsa.gov/tools/shortage-area/mua-find>

Also see: <https://data.hrsa.gov/> to determine if a practice site is located in a designated shortage area.

Conrad 30 Program

Conrad 30 Program

States can sponsor waivers in order to get physicians into hard-to-fill placements where they will be serving the medically underserved. There has to be an element of expanding the safety net.

There are 30 waivers per year for each state. The waivers become available October 1. Some states fill all 30 slots very quickly (a few hours); others never fill all 30 slots. Consult with the Primary Care Office (PCO) regarding state-specific details.

Up to 10 waiver numbers can be used for non-medically underserved placements (flex waivers). The balance can only be used for placements in medically designated areas.

Whether the waiver is a flex or normal waiver, the underlying goal is to show that the IMG will provide safety-net clinical services – i.e., serve the indigent and medically underserved and fill gaps in the medical delivery system.

If the J-1 waiver is granted, an IMG has a minimum three-year service obligation that needs to be fulfilled in H-1B status (could be more by state).

Learn more about Conrad 30 on the USCIS website:

<https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/students-and-exchange-visitors/conrad-30-waiver-program>

Potential State Variations

The federal statute for Conrad 30 is fairly straightforward. States have the ability to add additional parameters for how they fill their Conrad 30 slots and operate the Conrad program. Here are some examples of variations states may add:

- Primary care vs. specialty care
- Application periods & filing deadlines
- Non-compete clauses
- Liquidated damages
- Filing fees
- Reporting requirements
- Mandatory period of service
- Eligible employer requirements

3RNET maintains data on how many waivers are filled through the Conrad 30 program in each state annually. Find it here: www.3rnet.org/j1-filled

Agencies Offering Waivers

United States Department of Health & Human Services

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is responsible for managing the U.S. Exchange Visitor Program as it relates to health research and clinical care. This program accepts applications to request waiver of the 2-year foreign residency requirement related to two types of waivers:

- Research performed in an area of priority or significant interest to the agency, and
- Health care services needed in a Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA) in the United States. Physicians with J-1 visas must agree to deliver health care services for three years in a mental health or primary care HPSA.

<https://www.hhs.gov/about/agencies/oga/about-oga/what-we-do/exchange-visitor-program/index.html>

Appalachian Regional Commission

The ARC J-1 Visa Waiver Program is a need-based program, which is intended to benefit the people of Appalachia and exists to fill a gap that is not being filled by American physicians.

<https://www.arc.gov/j-1-visa-waivers/>

Delta Regional Authority

This program increases access to quality health care in DRA communities by using a J-1 visa waiver to allow foreign physicians trained in the United States to work in areas with a shortage of health professionals.

From 2019 to 2021, the DRA sponsored 440 physicians across the region, with 47% of placements occurring in Alabama and Louisiana. Twenty-five percent of DRA-sponsored doctors work in a primary care role, with the remainder working across more than 18 specialties.

<https://dra.gov/programs/human-infrastructure/health/delta-doctors/>

Southeast Crescent Regional Commission

SCRC region is comprised of the areas of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and all of Florida.

<https://scrc.gov/Grants-and-Programs/about-grants-and-programs>

Northern Border Regional Commission

The Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC) is committed to helping residents of Maine, New Hampshire, New York and Vermont obtain access to quality, affordable health care. The national healthcare provider shortage is one issue that affects equitable healthcare access in our region.

NBRC's J-1 Visa waiver program is modeled, in part, after the Appalachian Regional Commission's successful J-1 Visa waiver program. Under NBRC's program, requests for waivers must be sponsored by a state within the NBRC's region. The NBRC has collaborated closely with our state partners in Maine, New Hampshire, New York, and Vermont to complement each State's already existing Conrad 30 waiver programs.

<https://www.nbrc.gov/content/J1Visa>

Know the “Players”

Primary Care Office (PCO)

The PCO is the person or organization responsible for J-1 waivers and HPSA designations at the state level.

You can find a list of PCOs here: <https://bhwh.hrsa.gov/shortage-designation/hpsa/primary-care-offices>

An additional resource for J-1 contacts: <https://www.3rnet.org/members/j1-visa-contacts>

Questions to ask the PCO

- Where can I find HPSA maps for this state?
- What do you typically use your ‘flex’ positions for?
- Do you fill your slots? If so, how fast?
- What are the state specific requirements?
- Are there any state-specific application (or other) fees? What are they for, and how much are they?
- What are all of the agencies in this state that offer waivers? For example, Delta Regional Authority, Appalachian Regional Commission, Department of Health and Human Services.

Employer

Ultimately, it is the employer and not the IMG that applies for the J-1 waiver and sponsors the IMG for a change into H-1B status.

Employer has legal obligation to pay H-1B attorney fees and filing fee costs – conversely, the IMG cannot pay for H-1B fees or costs.

Need to make sure that the employer is aware of its immigration obligations.

Questions to ask the Employer

- Who in the organization will take the lead for immigration purposes?
- What has been the employer’s experience in the past with J-1 waivers?
- What attorneys has the employer used in the past?
- What is the culture in the employer?
- What assistance will you receive in integrating into the community?

Attorney

Regardless of who pays fees and unless affirmatively agreed to the contrary, an attorney has an equal obligation to both the employer & the IMG during the J-1 waiver & H-1B process.

Open up line of communication with the attorney. Make sure you are getting all copies of correspondence with employer and government agency. Make sure you understand what your lawyer is doing in your case.

Why hire an attorney?

The J-1 process is complex, extremely detail oriented, & very time consuming. An attorney ensures things are done effectively and in an efficient manner.

Questions to Ask an Attorney Before Hiring

- What is your history working with the J-1 process?
- Have you worked in the state I’m looking to work in?
- How do you charge? (Flat fee or hourly)

State J-1 Waiver Officer

State official who will review the J-1 waiver application & recommend the waiver for approval.

Usually, are accessible to inquiries.

Useful source of information & guidance on state waiver policies.

Timelines: Applications & Job Search Processes

Job Search Process

Start your job search 12-18 months prior to when you can potentially start working.

You need to narrow down WHERE you want to work by state to determine what you need to apply.

Determine which facilities are eligible (i.e. are in a HPSA or MUA).

Your visa is specific to one employer (i.e. in most instances you cannot moonlight). Ask an attorney if you have questions!

Once You Find A Job You Want

You're like any other resident trainee – you need a job. Once you find a job, you need to make sure you're eligible to work at said job.

Let the employer know you're looking for a visa sponsorship.

Facilities can ask during interview process: "Are you legally authorized to work in the United States?" and "Do you need visa sponsorship?"

Facilities can ask the following follow-up questions: "What is your current status?", "What visa sponsorship is needed?", and "How much time do you have left in your current status?"

Interview.

You can sign an employment contract, but you cannot work until you have that waiver and the H-1B work visa.

What You Need to Apply

A job offer where your employer will sponsor your J-1 visa waiver and H-1B work visa.

State license—depending on the state. (e.g. state's licensing process can take a long time so they may grant a waiver while the license is processing so as to not slow everything down).

Steps to the J-1 Waiver Process

A physician must secure a bona fide offer of employment from an employer that will sponsor the IMG for a J-1 waiver & a change into H-1B status.

IMG must apply for case number from the U.S. Department of State.

The health care facility applies for a J-1 waiver to the State Department of Health.

The state department of health (different in each state) sets guidelines that must be met to show that the physician will enhance coverage of medically at-risk populations.

U.S. Department of State reviews the J-1 waiver application (4-6 weeks).

U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services reviews J-1 waiver application & issues final approval (at least 2-6 weeks).

IMG must begin work within 90 days of receiving approval from USCIS.



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