

War in Europe to harm J-1 visa numbers

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aware [of the need]. Beckson said Ukraine sends fewer than 1,000 J-1 workers each year, whereas Russia is in the top 10 countries sending the most students. "First and foremost, our thoughts and hopes for safety are with the people in those regions," she said. "Russia hasn't been processing application forms this year and no one this year should expect many Russian workers." Beckson said Russian students must go to a different country for an interview to get a J-1 visa. "It's very cost-prohibitive and scheduling is difficult with bans on Russia airlines," she said. "I think some Russian students will get over but much fewer [than in the past]. I don't think it's going to have a huge impact unless some-

thing escalates, if Russia were to go into Poland or Slovakia." Cape May County Chamber of Commerce President Vicki Clark said businesses are reaching out to countries outside Eastern Europe, such as Jamaica and the Bahamas. **Local workers difficult to find** Finding workers has been problematic throughout the pandemic and exacerbated by the lack of J-1 students over the past two seasons. The program allows businesses to supplement their workforce, particularly at the end of the summer when local workers leave for college or return to sports practice. "I've never turned away an American kid to take place of a job of J-1 visa worker," Hartley said. "We

have so many opportunities here and are hiring throughout the season and hiring as many local kids as we can." Beckson said the number of domestic applications increases each year and already is higher than last year. "We've struggled for decades to get enough workers because the area has a fairly low population," she said. "The pandemic magnified the problem with less people in the workforce, but things seem to be bright-siding and we hope to have a more normal year." **Lack of workers forces changes** Hours of operation for amusement parks have changed in the past two years due to local regulations and mandates. Castaway Cove plans to open

at 3 p.m. daily starting this season and continuing forward. "In 2020 we opened at 6 p.m., not due to staffing issues but more restraints with masks," Hartley said. "With our operators and customers wearing masks and being out in the sun all day, we shifted to the nighttime operation when it was cooler." Hartley said he was unsure whether the number of J-1 students this summer would return to pre-pandemic numbers. "[The war has] changed a lot of things for certain countries and people are just working through it and dealing with it as best we can," Hartley said. Clark said she hopes the county will have 2,800 students this year. A full complement of international students included about 5,300 workers in the past.

Tourism officials

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the seventh-most-popular state for students participating in the program. "Things are looking much better than they have the last couple of years," she said. "The program is great for us and we're hopeful it's going to work out in a meaningful way this year. Honestly, if we have 2,000 students, that's probably as successful as we will be this year." **Slow process** To attain a J-1 visa, students must have a job before scheduling an appointment at the U.S. Department of State. Area businesses have already started recruiting students for this season. "With everything that's happened in the past couple of years with COVID, the U.S. Embassy offices are very backed up and short-staffed," Clark said. "It goes country by country with how quickly students are getting visa appointments." Clark checks in daily with local businesses on the student recruitment process. She said businesses are hopeful the students will get visa appointments and arrive on time to bring relief for the summer season. "Most students in New Jersey are working Atlantic City and south, which is why it's so important to us here," Clark said. "It's why we are the ones who are the most vocal in the state and reaching out to Congressman Jeff Van Drew."

J-1 visa students do not arrive as early as May, she hopes the students will be able to stay longer to help extend the season into the fall. "Businesses are reaching out to other countries in addition to Eastern Europe, like Jamaica and the Bahamas," Wieland said. "There are a few Caribbean countries that have the J-1 program, too." The chamber works closely with Sens. Bob Menendez and Cory Booker, as well as the entire New Jersey congressional delegation. "They're always on board and they understand that it's a cultural program for international students first and supplemental workforce program second," Clark said. "The entire tourism industry and our businesses could never be fully staffed with just the people who live in Cape May County." The J-1 program is exceedingly popular for tourism destinations with low population numbers, including both summer and winter resort areas. Clark said the open space and protected landscapes, such as local beaches, contribute to the program's success. "I think most people in Cape May County realize how valuable this program is because it's not only valuable for the [international] students to experience what life is like in America — they go home and share that with their friends and family — it's also great for the people here who may never travel to Romania, Thailand or Jamaica," Clark said. She said it's great for residents and their children who work alongside international students to get a glimpse of different parts of the world. "It's a wonderful domestic program through the Department of State," she added. "As we saw last year and the year before, without them our tourism industry and brand of customer service really does suffer."

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More's Piers has 1,500 seasonal positions to fill, and Beckson said 500 to 600 of those openings are typically J-1 visa workers. "The numbers are skewed a bit because 1,500 positions is not necessarily 1,500 people," she said. "It's hard to measure exactly what we need but things are looking adequate for staffing." The availability of workers has changed, and to combat it, More's Piers has become more flexible with hiring. "We've gotten more flexible with availability for our U.S. employees," she said. "If someone can work part time or flexible hours, we're much more willing to work with them on that." More's Piers is working to create more career positions available for year-round residents. "We just haven't been there in the past [years] with a shortened calendar, diminished hours and closed rides," Beckson said. "Our New Jersey legislators recognize that and we hope to see the movement we need to get students here."

Wieland said even if the

Cape May Taxpayers Assoc. establishes scholarship

CAPE MAY — In recognition of the importance of education, beginning this year the Cape May Taxpayers Association is instituting an annual scholarship for a graduating senior living in Cape May.

The \$1,000 scholarship will be based on community service, high school academic performance and financial need. The recipient will be selected by the Board of Directors of the CMTPA. To be eligible, students must be full-time, year-round residents of Cape May or the U.S. Coast Guard base and have attended Lower Cape May Regional High School or Wildwood Catholic High School, or any other accredited secondary school, for a minimum of two years. Additionally, the recipient

must be enrolled as a full-time degree pursuit student at an accredited college or technical school. A full course load must be scheduled for the entire first year. The scholarship will be paid directly to the student prior to the fall 2022 enrollment year. Applications have been distributed to guidance offices of all accredited secondary schools. The guidance office will forward all applications to the Taxpayers Association by Wednesday, April 20. No application will be accepted after that date.

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Two Lower cops resign after theft

VILLAS — Two Lower Township police officers charged with stealing bicycles in Cape May have resigned from the police department and entered a pretrial intervention (PTI) program. Eric Campbell and Austin Craig, both 28, were charged in October 2021 after surveillance video

showed them removing bicycles from a rack on Decatur Street in Cape May. Both officers were suspended without pay. The fourth-degree theft charges would be dismissed if Campbell and Craig complete the PTI program. Craig is the son of former Lower Township mayor Walt Craig.

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