



Foreign national physicians who seek entry into U.S. programs of graduate medical education or training must obtain an appropriate visa that permits clinical training activities. One visa commonly used by foreign national physicians is the J-1, a temporary nonimmigrant visa reserved for participants in the **Exchange Visitor Program**. As a public diplomacy initiative of the U.S. Department of State, the Exchange Visitor Program was established to enhance international exchange and mutual understanding between the people of the United States and other nations. In keeping with the Program's goals for international education, **J-1 exchange visitor physicians** are required to return home for at least two years following their training before being eligible for certain U.S. visas.

The U.S. Department of State has designated the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG) as the visa sponsor for all J-1 exchange visitor physicians who participate in clinical training programs. ECFMG administers its sponsorship program in accordance with the provisions set forth in a Memorandum of Understanding between ECFMG and the Department of State and the federal regulations established to implement the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1948. ECFMG is responsible for ensuring that J-1 physicians and host institutions meet the federal requirements for participation. ECFMG does not sponsor physicians for other U.S. visa types.

## **General Eligibility & Requirements**

Foreign national physicians seeking J-1 sponsorship to enroll in programs of graduate medical education (GME) or training in the United States must fulfill a number of general requirements, which are detailed in the application materials. At a minimum, applicants must:

- Have passed Step 1 and Step 2 of the United States Medical Licensing Examination™ (USMLE™) [and/or an acceptable combination of components of the former Foreign Medical Graduate Examination in the Medical Sciences (FMGEMS), the National Board of Medical Examiners® (NBME®) Part sequence, or the Visa Qualifying Examination (VQE)];
- Hold a **valid** Standard ECFMG Certificate at commencement of training;
- Hold a contract or an official letter of offer for a position in an accredited program of graduate medical education or training that is affiliated with a medical school;
- Provide a Statement of Need from the Ministry of Health of the country of last legal permanent residence, regardless of country of citizenship. This statement provides written assurance that the country needs physicians trained in the proposed specialty and/or subspecialty. It also serves to confirm the applicant physician's commitment to return to that country upon completion of training in the United States, as required by Section 212(e) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, as amended.

Exchange visitor physicians must maintain J-1 status by applying to ECFMG for renewed visa sponsorship, typically on an annual basis. Through this process ECFMG reevaluates the physician's continued eligibility to participate in the J-1 Exchange Visitor Program.

To ensure that approved training begins and continues as scheduled, physicians and host institutions should allow adequate time for the processing of required immigration and GME authorizations. This processing time, which begins with the foreign national physician's application for sponsorship, varies widely and may range from several weeks to months. Additionally, the U.S. Government continues to review its visa procedures, which may affect processing time.

## **Sponsorship Process**

ECFMG facilitates J-1 visa sponsorship through the coordinated efforts of training institutions and foreign national physician applicants. ECFMG verifies that the foreign national physicians meet J-1 eligibility requirements. The host institution is responsible for providing the J-1 physician with the approved clinical training. Each host institution designates a **Training Program Liaison (TPL)** who serves as the official representative to communicate with ECFMG. This communication ensures regulatory compliance and provides the required administrative oversight for J-1 physicians. Communication regarding all aspects of J-1 sponsorship must be conducted through the TPL. Immediately after obtaining a training contract, the foreign national physician should initiate the sponsorship process by contacting the TPL at the host institution.

Effective January 30, 2003, the U.S. Government implemented the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS). SEVIS is a national, web-based tracking system designed to assist educational institutions and government agencies in managing foreign national student and exchange visitor data. As a designated visa sponsor, ECFMG is required to process J-1 visa sponsorship through SEVIS.

Upon establishing an applicant's eligibility, ECFMG issues **Form DS-2019, Certificate of Eligibility for Exchange Visitor (J-1) Status**. The physician may also request Form DS-2019 to enable dependents (spouse and unmarried, minor children) to apply for J-2 dependent status. Issuance of Forms DS-2019 indicates that the physician and dependents are eligible to apply for the J visa. Agencies of the U.S. Government make decisions regarding the issuance of visas. The DS-2019 is one of many factors considered by the U.S. Government in determining whether to issue the visa. Policies and procedures of the U.S. Government vary and are subject to change. J-1 physicians and J-2 dependents are responsible for complying with all U.S. laws and regulations pertaining to foreign nationals. A summary of selected regulations follows.

## **Duration of Participation**

The duration of participation for J-1 physicians in graduate medical education is the "time typically required" to complete the program. This generally refers to the minimum number of training years required by an American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) member board for specialty or subspecialty certification and/or the accredited length of training as defined by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME). Duration is further limited to seven years, provided that the J-1 physician is advancing in an approved program of graduate medical education or training. The J-1 visa, however, does not entitle J-1 physicians to seven years of sponsorship. J-1 physicians are encouraged to consult with ECFMG regarding proposed educational pathways and sponsorship eligibility.

## **Training Authorization/Employment**

Associated training/employment authorization is specific to the approved activities stated on Form DS-2019. A Form DS-2019 obtained for a particular program may be used only for that program and is not transferable to another institution or program. Federal regulations prohibit work, training, and/or financial compensation for activities that are outside of the approved Exchange Visitor Program.

## **Two-Year Home Country Physical Presence Requirement**

In accordance with Section 212(e) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, as amended, all J-1 Exchange Visitors who are sponsored by ECFMG for the purpose of graduate medical education or training (and all accompanying J-2 dependents) are automatically obligated to return to their country of last legal permanent residence for an aggregate of at least two years. At the initiation of J-1 sponsorship, the J-1 applicant declares his country of last legal permanent residence and submits the corresponding Statement of Need, thereby committing to return to that country. The 212(e) obligation may not be fulfilled in a different country. An individual must fulfill (or obtain a waiver of) this obligation before being eligible for a change or adjustment of visa status to certain types of U.S. visas. These visa types include: H (temporary worker), L (intra-company transferee), and U.S. permanent resident.

### **Resources**

ECFMG Exchange Visitor Sponsorship Program — Visit ECFMG's website at [www.ecfm.org/evsp](http://www.ecfm.org/evsp) for access to:  
Exchange Visitor Sponsorship Program *Reference Guide*  
Application materials  
Important updates

ECFMG Certification — [www.ecfm.org](http://www.ecfm.org)

U.S. Department of State Exchange Visitor Program (DOS-EVP) — <http://exchanges.state.gov/education/jexchanges>

Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services — [www.immigration.gov](http://www.immigration.gov)

U.S. Department of Homeland Security — [www.dhs.gov/dhspublic](http://www.dhs.gov/dhspublic)

U.S. Embassies and Consulates — <http://travel.state.gov/links.html>

American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) — [www.abms.org](http://www.abms.org)

Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) — [www.acgme.org](http://www.acgme.org)

### **Additional Information**

ECFMG-EVSP representatives are available to answer your questions by

**phone** at 215-823-2121 from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm, eastern time in the United States, Monday through Friday;

**fax** at 215-386-9766; or

**mail** at 3624 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104-2685, USA.

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### **ECFMG**

ECFMG is a private, nonprofit organization committed to promoting excellence in international medical education. ECFMG's aims and missions include providing information to international medical graduates (IMGs) regarding entry into graduate medical education and health care systems in the United States, evaluating the qualifications of IMGs, and providing international access to testing and evaluation programs.

ECFMG is sponsored by the following major medical organizations: American Board of Medical Specialties, American Medical Association, Association of American Medical Colleges, Association for Hospital Medical Education, Federation of State Medical Boards of the United States, Inc., National Medical Association.