



The benefits pause had been in place since late 2025.

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A federal court has blocked a Trump administration policy that paused the processing of nonimmigrant benefits for individuals from 40 countries and territories, but those impacted by the pause say it still left long-term impacts.

In a 135-page decision, John J. McConnell Jr., a federal judge in Rhode Island, found the pause unlawful for several reasons, including that it discriminated against applicants based on their country of origin.

“When USCIS first enacted the policies at the center of this litigation, the agency did not simply place a hold on adjudications,” he wrote. “More fundamentally, the Challenged Policies placed the lives of countless individuals on hold—solely by virtue of their countries of birth. Over six months later, many of those individuals remain without work, without legal status, and without any meaningful ability to plan for their futures.”

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U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services quietly paused the processing of those applications—which include the application for Optional Practical Training, which allows international students to work in the U.S. after completing their degree, as well as green card applications—via memos in December and January. At the time, the office said the pause would last until it had implemented new

processes for vetting those applications, but months passed with no word on when applications would be reviewed.

Students graduating college with job offers in hand had no idea if they would be authorized to start those positions. Some paid large sums for their applications to be expedited before they learned of the pause, but doing so made no difference. USCIS said it wouldn't be able to refund the fees until the pause was lifted.

In late April, the agency adjusted its policy, allowing exceptions for physicians on a case-by-case basis; international medical students often begin their residencies, a four-year period of on-the-job training after graduation, on OPT. But individuals in all other disciplines remained in limbo.

Now, USCIS has been ordered to resume evaluating these applications; in a statement on its website, the agency wrote, "USCIS strongly disagrees with the Court's order but will follow its terms pending possible further judicial review."

It's unclear how long it will take for the agency—which already had a substantial backlog—to catch up. A spokesperson for NAFSA, the association for international education professionals, said that, while it was "pleased" with the ruling, "it is too soon to see it play out on campuses."

A press relations representative for Press Unpause, a grassroots group that has been advocating for USCIS to

end the hold on application processing, told *Inside Higher Ed* the organization hasn't heard about any applications being processed since the ruling, nor about any issued refunds.

“The long-term impacts are deeply troubling,” the organization wrote in an emailed statement, calling the last seven months “traumatic.”

The USCIS pause and threats to OPT at large are among the policies from the Trump administration that international educators warn are making the United States less desirable for international students. Last fall saw a significant drop in new international student visas. If the numbers continue to trend downward, it could severely impact institutions that count on international students to meet their enrollment goals.

Waiting for OPT approval hasn't gotten easier since the ruling. Ignacio, an F-1 student who recently graduated from a highly rated M.B.A. program and has a job lined at a major tech company, said his company has already pushed his start date back once waiting for his OPT to be approved. He isn't certain they'll be willing to do so again.

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“The harm for them has been really big, because they were expecting me to come over to a senior position and take over a product in the company ... the other teammates are having to lift my weight until I’m able to start,” said Ignacio, who requested to be referred to by his first name at his attorney’s recommendation. “There’s harm, also, to U.S. companies.”

He said that, at the end of this month, he will have lost \$14,000 in wages thanks to the hold, as well as thousands more in legal fees and the cost of premium processing. He also won the H-1B lottery, but that visa would not begin until October and he doesn’t know whether the company will wait for him until then.

Kimberley Duru, an F-1 student from Nigeria who recently graduated from medical school, told *Inside Higher Ed* in an email that she was approved for OPT under the physician exception but hadn’t yet received a physical work permit, preventing her from starting her residency.

“My residency program has been very supportive and is anticipating my arrival. They are holding my position and waiting for me to receive the permit to proceed to the next steps,” she wrote. “However, it is still sad that this arbitrary policy means I will have to play catch-up once I am able to join my cohort.”

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