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June 6th, 2013

Honorable Senator Lisa Murkowski
United States Senate
709 Hart Senate Bldg
Washington, DC 20510

RE: Senate Bill 744 - IMMIGRATION BILL AND J1 VISA STATUS

Dear Senator Murkowski:

On behalf of the Alaska Travel Industry Association (ATIA), we are responding to the forward momentum of SB 744 which would eliminate the J1 Visa Program by 2015. As Alaska's largest membership non-profit association advocating on behalf of its over 700 members involved in Alaska's travel and tourism industry, ATIA is opposed to the elimination of this valuable program and the proposed replacement by W-Visa Program for the following reasons:

- **Alaska's tourism industry is 70% Alaska hire.** Be assured, Alaska's tourism industry has been, is and will remain committed to Alaska hire first and foremost. The J1 Visa program only supplements Alaska hire primarily during the peak summer visitor season.
- **The J1 Visa is genuinely a cultural exchange program** that allows international students a cultural immersion while also earning money to continue their educations. In exchange, Alaskan employees benefit from interaction with these international hires. Alaska is particularly popular for a variety of reasons. The students take advantage of touring and experiencing Alaska culture and scenery, excellent wage rates of pay for comparable jobs, and the good reputations of Alaska employers. Alaska's visitor industry introduces the international students to our workforce, our local "customs/traditions," our customer base, and our year-round Alaskan workers. The students daily interact with Alaskans in the work environment and many in their living environment.
- **Participating employers work with sponsoring companies to qualify employees in order to ensure the best possible Alaskan experience.** Alaskan employers work to develop job descriptions that include: wages, bonuses, living accommodations, anticipated expenses, activities in the area, cultural opportunities, travel requirements, and transportation options to the work location. They also interview applicants to ensure students have a good grasp of the English language and are committed to upholding the employment expectations of the Cultural Exchange Program. Most employers would agree that there is a noticeable improvement in English language skills in the course of their cultural exchange in Alaska. Those employers participating in the exchange conscientiously work to provide them with exceptional memories and an understanding of what it is like to work in Alaska.
- **Visiting students provide a cultural bridge to travelers from around the globe.** Approximately ten percent of Alaska's summer visitors are international travelers. There are many customer service benefits of having J1 Visa student interacting with these guests.

- **Many visiting students take advantage of exploring Alaska as well as other regions of the U.S. during and before and after their hiring period.** Students also get an opportunity to see the natural grandeur of the National Parks in Alaska and work with people of the same age, and in most cases, similar world traveler interests.
- **Limiting the Cultural Exchange Program will only incur higher costs and limit the number of students hired for summer work.** It will deprive many foreign students the opportunity to work and learn about the culture in America and Alaska.

Please feel free to contact us with any additional questions or concerns.

Respectfully,



Kirk Hoessle
Chairman of the Board of Directors



Sarah Leonard
President and COO

The Alaska Travel Industry Association is the leading industry organization for travel-related businesses and supporters and is comprised of over 700 members. ATIA is the respected voice of the industry for the growth and stability of the industry while remaining attentive to the environment, recognition of cultures and Alaska's unique quality of life.