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Trump's proposed H-1B visa fee brings anxiety to Massachusetts companies and workers

By [Hiawatha Bray](#) Globe Staff, Updated September 24, 2025, 7:46 p.m.

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The Trump administration's changes to the H-1B visa program are producing questions and uncertainties for Boston-area companies and workers. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

President Trump's [proposed \\$100,000 fee for H-1B visa applications](#) for highly skilled foreign workers is supposed to protect jobs for Americans. But some experts say it will have an outsized effect on Massachusetts, because some of the state's most prominent employers are reliant on the visas for talent.

Nearly every major player in the knowledge economy of Greater Boston relies on foreign-born workers, from financial services giants Fidelity and State Street, to tech leaders Analog Devices and PTC, to universities and hospitals.

The H-1B program, started in 1990, is supposed to help businesses recruit exceptional foreign talent when they're not able to find US workers with similar skills. But it has also been the subject of criticism from people who say the visa program has been abused by companies that end up paying foreign workers less than their US-born counterparts.

More than 12,000 new or renewed H-1B visas were issued to about 2,000 Massachusetts companies during the 2025 fiscal year, [according to data](#) from the US Citizenship and Immigration Services. Dave Gulley, professor of economics at Bentley University, argues that if it becomes more expensive to employ such workers, some Massachusetts companies may end up hiring less qualified domestic applicants.

"Many of these jobs will be filled, of course," Gulley said, "but maybe not by people who are quite as good."

The Globe sought comment from more than two dozen local companies and universities; most did not respond, while several refused to comment. Others, including Boston University and Mass General Brigham, said they needed more time to study Trump's proposal.

Even though the new fee doesn't apply to those who already have H-1B visas, the news dismayed immigrant workers who are feeling that the United States is no longer a welcoming place.

In online forums including Reddit's community focused on H-1B visas, people in recent days have expressed confusion and outrage over the proposed changes.

One H-1B visa holder, an engineer from India who works at Boston-based online auto retailer CarGurus and asked not to be named for fear of retribution, said the new fee was just one more action by the Trump administration to make life in this country difficult for immigrants.

The engineer, who holds master's degrees from elite US universities and has published multiple scientific papers, is now considering a move to Canada.

"I'm thinking of getting . . . out," he said, "because it's really bad here."

H-1B visas are mostly used to bring in scientists, engineers, and software developers, but also accountants, attorneys, and even journalists. Universities also use the visas to hire faculty members. For instance, Harvard claimed 136 H-1B visas in the 2025 fiscal year and MIT had 116.

The United States issues 85,000 of the visas for businesses each year, using a lottery system to determine who gets them. A separate H-1B program for academic institutions can issue an unlimited number of visas.

Each visa is good for three years, and can be extended for another three. Recipients are also eligible to apply for permanent resident status (a green card). But only 140,000 green cards a year are allocated to people here on work-related visas, and no more than 7 percent per year can go to residents of any one country. As a result, applicants from nations such as India usually have to wait decades for those green cards.

H-1B visas are issued to institutions, not individuals. So a company or a university can request a visa for a foreign-born worker. But if an H-1B worker is laid off, they must find a new sponsor within 60 days, or leave the country .

The program has attracted bipartisan attacks from critics who say it lets US companies hire foreign workers for less than they'd pay US workers of equal skill.

"I think there are better ways to fix the program," said Daniel Costa, director of immigration at the Economic Policy Institute in Washington

Costa said that while the current law requires H-1B workers be paid the "prevailing wage," it also allows four different tiers of pay for workers of varying skill levels. He said many employers assign even their best foreign workers to the lower pay tiers. That saves them thousands of dollars per worker, compared to what they'd have to pay US citizens of equal skill.

Rather than hike the visa fee, Costa favors requiring companies to pay all H-1B workers at the highest tier. Or, adjust the lottery system to include preferences for higher-paying jobs. Employers who promised to pay the top tier would get first crack at the visas.

The Trump administration also likes that idea. On Wednesday, the Department of Homeland Security [issued a proposal](#) to modify the lottery so higher-paid jobs are prioritized.

But the high entry fee will remain, giving big, wealthy companies a massive advantage over smaller ones in the H-1B talent hunt.

US tech titans account for a huge number of the visas. More than 10,000 new or renewed visas were issued in fiscal 2025 to Amazon, about 5,200 to Microsoft, and roughly the same number to Facebook parent Meta.

Gulley said the new fee will end up hurting smaller companies, such as tech startups, the most, as "that \$100,000 becomes a real barrier," he said. "Far, far fewer small companies will be able to take advantage of H-1B people."

In addition, paying the fee doesn't guarantee that the company's bid for a visa will be approved. Up to now, employers have had to pay around \$2,300 in application fees, and this money is nonrefundable if the visa is denied.

When asked whether the much higher fee will be refundable, USCIS referred the Globe to government websites that didn't provide a specific answer. But the agency's policy manual still says fees are generally nonrefundable.

James Rooney, president of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, recalled that not long ago, Trump proposed granting permanent resident status to any foreign-born student who graduated from a US college.

"It's hard to understand why he'd flip on this," said Rooney. "To put a barrier up like a \$100,000 fee is just incredibly short-sighted."

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