

The Dallas Morning News

Trump must ease restrictions on visas for foreign-born health care workers

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April 19, 2020

As a growing number of states call for more health care workers to support the hardest-hit hospitals in the COVID-19 pandemic, too many foreign-born physicians and nurses may soon find themselves unable to help due to restrictive immigration rules. To ensure a continuation of vital services, the U.S. government should consider letting more foreign-born physicians, nurses and other front-line medical professional work at a time when we need them most.

Representing almost 1 in 3 physicians and 1 in 6 nurses, foreign-born health care workers are already playing a vital role in treating Americans suffering from the novel coronavirus. According to immigration policy analyst David Bier at the Cato Institute, there are around 1.7 million foreign-born health care workers in the United States, while immigrants account for 40% of medical scientists and 20% of biological scientists.

Every year thousands of immigrant physicians and medical professionals enter the United States on temporary H-1B visas, yet restrictive visa caps mean that only a fraction of applicants will be permitted to work. The annual cap on H-1B visas should be waived for all foreign-born health care workers, just as the cap is waived for workers in educational and nonprofit sectors. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services could also expedite all employment authorization documents and waive processing fees for health care workers applying for or renewing H-1B visas.

In addition to expanding the number of available temporary work visas, restrictive regulations should be eased for health care and medical professionals to allow greater flexibility to meet the demands of the pandemic. Workers should, for example, be allowed to work for more than one hospital as this crisis evolves and conditions change.

A second group of foreign-born health care professionals who currently face heavily restrictive rules to stay and work in the United States are graduate medical professionals and physicians on J-1 visa programs. International students who graduate with degrees in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) are eligible for a 24-month extension to their optional practical training if they secure jobs in their fields of study. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services should expand the STEM occupation list to include nurses and doctors, so F-1 academic students and J-1 medical students can access post-graduation employment authorization for two years.

Moreover, to ensure an adequate supply of health care professionals, the whole country should be temporarily declared a medically underserved region during the pandemic period. The U.S. Department of State should act to expedite the J-1 waiver for physicians. This waiver is usually

permitted only for health care workers serving underserved areas, and the process of acquiring a waiver can often take months. The State Department could expedite the waiver for physicians to allow case approval in as little as one week.

Since President Donald Trump signed the “Buy American and Hire American” executive order in 2017, visa programs for skilled workers have become increasingly restrictive. The administration should revoke the executive order for all health care workers to avoid a backlog in visa processing times, and U.S. Customs and Border Protection should exempt all health care workers from travel bans and border closures. While additional health screening may be necessary at this time, we should do what’s necessary to facilitate their movement to where they are most needed.

In the midst of the worst health care crises in a century, it should be the priority of government at all levels to encourage more foreign-born doctors to enter into (or remain in, for those already here) the health care labor force. Government agencies should act as soon as possible to raise visa caps for foreign-born health care workers, expedite visa processing times, exempt health care workers from residency restrictions, and temporarily expand the definition of underserved areas to ensure an adequate supply of health care workers during this pandemic.