

THE WEEK

Trump's crackdown on skilled immigrants is hurting our coronavirus response

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President Donald Trump has said he is directing federal medical bureaucracies to cut any red tape that might be hampering new tests and better drugs to fight coronavirus. While he's at it, he should direct immigration bureaucracies to do the same.

The H-1B visa program that allows companies to hire foreign technical talent has always been woefully inadequate. The annual visa cap — 65,000 for professionals and 25,000 for foreign students graduating from American universities — fills within weeks of opening every April. That means companies that don't land a visa have to wait another year when they can play the lottery again. Most hires can't simply sit around, so they leave for better climes elsewhere, especially Canada, which has become a popular destination for spurned H-1Bs. Now, more than ever, the coronavirus crisis means the U.S. and the world can't afford to let this happen. Whatever the case for restricting travel by infected foreigners, foreign health care professionals fighting to save American lives and foreign researchers developing treatments should be allowed to stay in the country if they are here and fast-tracked in if they are not.

But that'll require Trump to undo all the damage his administration has done to America's ability to recruit talented foreigners and put more welcoming policies in place.

Thanks to Trump's 2017 Buy American and Hire American directive, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) massively increased the red tape for the H-1B program. Why? Because it wanted to ensure that immigrants wouldn't land any job that an American can do — never mind that STEM graduates have been in short supply for years with jobs going a begging. To this end, it started issuing twice as many "requests for evidence," requiring employers to furnish even more documentation than usual to justify that they absolutely needed a foreign-born worker for a job before handing them an H-1B. And it started rejecting more applications. The upshot has been more delays and denials.

The denial rate for new H-1Bs in 2016 before Trump's directive was 10 percent. Last year? 24 percent. Worse, H-1B renewals used to be a pro-forma matter. But now they are being treated like new applications. So their denial rate too has spiked from 4 percent in 2016 to 18 percent in the first quarter of 2019. This means that foreigners who have been living and making vital economic contributions for years are being suddenly asked to pack up and leave.

Given how much the health care sector relies on them, the post-coronavirus cost of kicking these folks out won't only be in dollars and cents but also in death and illness.

Indeed, over one in six of America's 12.4 million medical work force is foreign-born. This includes researchers, teachers, administrators, and doctors. About 16 percent of registered nurses are foreign-born. Some 278,000 doctors in America have international medical degrees — or 27 percent of all doctors in the country. Foreign physicians and surgeons constitute 12 percent of America's total doctors.

More crucially, foreign medical professionals tend to be concentrated in underserved and poor areas that are likely to be worse hit by corona given that these folks have fewer means to stockpile for months and hunker down.

In areas with the highest poverty levels where more than 30 percent of the U.S. population lives, nearly one-third of all doctors are foreign-trained. Of all those serving areas where per-capita income is less than \$15,000 per year, upwards of 42 percent are foreign-trained. These doctors are also more likely to serve African Americans, Hispanics, and other non-white populations.

Wuhan, China, the epicenter of the outbreak, flew in 42,000 health-care workers from outside the province to supplement those who contracted the virus and fell sick. It would be sheer insanity for the U.S. to spurn a single health-care worker in the same circumstance.

Foreign medical professionals aren't the only ones the country needs right now. Ultimately, permanently defeating the virus will require vaccines and cures. And tapping the best and brightest from everywhere and anywhere will be crucial in developing those.

Cato Institute's David Bier has estimated that the eight major U.S. biomedical or pharmaceutical companies currently working on coronavirus obtained 11,000 H-1Bs and green cards between 2010 and 2019. Their hires included biochemists, biophysicists, chemists and 2,801 statisticians who will be vital in understanding the epidemiological spread of the disease. No doubt these numbers would have been bigger had the Trump administration not been denying so many visa requests.

One of the companies that Trump identified as working on a promising cure when he touted his initiative to cut FDA's onerous testing requirements was Gilead. But Gilead needs not just freedom from FDA rules to develop drugs, it also needs freedom from nonsensical visa rules to recruit researchers. Indeed, in Bier's sample, Gilead alone obtained green cards for 235 immigrants and H-1B visas for 9,085 temporary workers.

The Trump administration isn't only attacking the H-1B program to keep out foreign talent, it is clamping down on other channels as well. ProPublica recently published a major investigation showing that in the last few years, the National Institute of Health has been asking federal investigators to probe ever more foreign researchers at American universities for allegedly failing to disclose their collaborations with universities abroad. Chinese researchers have been an especially big target out of fear that they are handing over privileged research to state universities in China. One Chinese University of Florida chemistry professor who was thrown out of the country is now back in China working on a coronavirus test.

Some of these concerns might be justified, but the last thing that America needs right now is a brain drain. In fact, the Trump administration should not only relax overall H-1B rules, it should create special visa programs to expeditiously recruit talent in the race to conquer coronavirus. It should also do what Sen. Mitt Romney (R-Utah) suggested during his failed presidential bid, namely, staple a green card to the diploma of every foreign student graduating from an American

university. It makes zero sense for America to train foreign students only to lose them to other countries.

Now, more than ever, America needs to hang on to its innovative capacity that immigrants have played a major role in building. Americans' — and others' — lives might depend on it.