



Immigrant healthcare workers ask for help staying in the country

Pilar Pedraza

May 5, 2020

As doctors nationwide struggle to fight coronavirus, some doctors here in Kansas are in a fight of their own – to remain in the United States with their families permanently.

Dr. Akshath Kamath sees Liberal, Kansas, as his home.

“I intend to stay here for the long term,” he said.

He’s one of thousands of immigrants in the United States providing badly needed medical care in the middle of the pandemic. Among other things, he runs the ICU at Southwest Medical Center.

“I have about six patients on the ventilator,” he said.

As a member of Physicians for American Healthcare Access (PAHA), he’s asking his congressman and senators to pay immigrant healthcare workers back for their life-giving work by moving them to the front of the line for green cards.

Like many, he’s here on an H1-b visa. Among the rules, his family can only stay in the U.S. as long as he can work. If he catches the virus at work and is permanently disabled or dies, they have to leave the country.

“My three-year-old daughter, she was born here. She does not know life beyond the U.S.,” Kamath said.

According to the US Customs and Immigration Services website there are about 12,000 healthcare workers in the country in the same situation, about 300 of them here in Kansas. They’re mostly in rural areas that struggle to attract and keep medical workers.

Washington think tank, The Cato Institute, says there’s a backlog of more than a million green card applications with Indians like Dr. Kamath making up 75% of the backlog. This means a decades-long wait for hundreds of thousands of folks like him, already eligible for a green card but too far down the line to qualify.

Kamath has reached out to Kansas congressional delegation, asking them to support the Healthcare Workforce Resilience Act. Proposed as part of the next stimulus bill it would make it easier for immigrants helping save lives to stay in the country.

“I feel like all of us deserve to be, you know, not discriminated against and to be taken care of and have the safety nets for our families,” Kamath said.