

Bipartisan immigration bill could help solve health care crisis

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I'm a physician who specializes in treating older patients for conditions and illnesses associated with aging. As a so-called "geriatrician," I run a non-stop practice. I work full-time five days a week, in addition to overnight and weekend call coverage. Even so, new patients must wait three months to get an appointment. And many existing patients drive hours from out of state just to see me. No, I'm not a celebrity doctor; I work in an industry with a devastating worker shortage.

We are in the midst of a health care crisis that will only worsen as baby boomers age into retirement and require more care. The future looks particularly bleak for rural counties which, compared to urban areas, have less than half as many active physicians covering their population, according to New American Economy (NAE). And yet an antiquated immigration law, which prohibits more than 7% of people from any one country from applying for green cards each year, prevents high-skilled immigrants from addressing this need.

Immigrants with advanced degrees who come from populous countries like my native India, must wait decades or more before they gain permanent residency, according to the Cato Institute. Kept in limbo, these engineers, scientists and, yes, doctors, can't permanently settle where we need them most. Many, in fact, are bypassing the United States for Canada.

Fortunately, a solution may be in sight. The House is scheduled to vote this Wednesday on the bipartisan Fairness for High-Skilled Immigrants Act, which would eliminate the per-country cap for employment-based green card applications and open our doors to the global talent that industries like mine desperately need.

I graduated from Kakatiya Medical College in Warangal in Central India and moved to the United States in 2001. I passed a series of difficult exams before receiving my medical license. Though I started in New York City, I later moved to East Lansing, Michigan, and Indianapolis, Indiana before landing at the University of Cincinnati. Like many immigrants, who come to this country with a globe-trotting flexibility, I was happy to devote my skills to rural, urban and underserved populations across the Midwest.

But this was only possible long-term, because I received a green card. Without permanent residency, I wouldn't have been able to truly make Cincinnati my home: getting married, buying a home and starting a family. I might have been forced to leave medicine for other work, or to take my skills and tax dollars to another country. Too many other immigrant doctors have been forced into this position. And that's something the country can't afford.

Foreign-born workers are twice as likely to fill roles such as physicians and surgeons, according to NAE. They're also more willing to relocate, which means immigrants fill doctor vacancies in

some rural communities that need them most; according to NAE, 135 U.S. counties lack a single physician. Additionally, there were 4.4 health care jobs advertised online for every 1 unemployed health care worker in 2013, indicating a severe worker shortage that is only going to get worse.

The Fairness for High-Skilled Immigrants Act is one way policy makers can address this worker shortage now. It's encouraging to see bipartisan support among the bill's list of cosponsors, which includes Ohio's own representatives Joyce Beatty, Bob Gibbs, Bill Johnson, Steve Stivers, Tim Ryan, Anthony Gonzalez, Troy Balderson and Brad Wenstrup. By voting in favor of this bill, our nation's leaders would help employers like hospitals hire medical professionals and address the pressing needs of our most vulnerable communities. I see this as vital to my industry, and for our ability to care for current and future generations.