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I'm an immigrant doctor treating COVID-19 patients. Death isn't my only fear right now

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I am a kidney doctor in rural Pennsylvania, caring for COVID-19 patients and trying my best to survive despite limited supplies of personal protective equipment.

I am also one of some 300,000 Indians in the United States on a H-1B work visa, waiting in line for a green card that would give me legal permanent residency.

My greatest fear is that if I contract and die from COVID-19, my wife, who is on a dependent visa, will be asked to go back to India. My 1-year-old daughter, an American citizen by birth, cannot travel with her as the Indian government has a travel embargo on all foreign citizens to limit entry of COVID-19 patients.

Every year, the United States issues 140,000 green cards based on employment. A maximum of 7% can go to any single country (usually, only 3,000). This system has resulted in a backlog of several hundred thousand immigrants from India waiting for permanent residency status. Their immigration petitions have been approved, but there are no green cards available. The Cato Institute and other agencies estimate the wait time for Indian immigrants approved today to be up to 150 years.

The never-ending wait is sheer torture. After paying taxes for decades, I would not be eligible for Social Security in retirement. Getting a driver's license requires multiple trips to the DMV, waiting for immigration verification. There is a court battle going on over whether my wife and immigrants like her can work during their decades in limbo. Many employers are unwilling to deal with hiring people on a work visa, like me. Most credit unions will not make me a member and lenders will not consider me for a mortgage.

Most of my friends and patients are happily oblivious of this situation. A lot of people seem to think that I can just walk to an immigration office, fill out some applications and get citizenship. They don't realize that there is no viable path for immigrants like me. Politicians claim to be "for" legal immigration and "against" illegal immigration all the time. Yet, initiatives to help highly skilled immigrants have gotten nowhere.

One proposal, the federal Fairness for High-Skilled Immigrants Act, was approved in the House but has been stuck in the Senate Judiciary Committee. During this pandemic, it would make good sense to eliminate country caps by declaring a onetime, emergency increase in the number of green cards issued to immigrants with critically required skills.

Doctors from India like me make up around 5.1% of the total physician workforce in the United States. With the never-ending wait, many of them are abandoning their American dream and taking their skills elsewhere. Their absence will be felt even more in public health crises such as the COVID-19 outbreak. I hope and pray that this situation gets resolved before I am forced to join this exodus.

In the meantime, I will keep on being extra diligent with my reused personal protective equipment. I cannot afford to die while waiting for a green card.