

# THE KANSAS CITY STAR.

## **I'm an immigrant helping rural Missouri businesses, and I may be forced to leave home**

Krishna Priya

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Krishna Priya works with companies in three counties and 27 communities in Missouri's Boonslick region northwest of Columbia.

Over the past year, I've had a front-row seat to the pandemic's terrible impact on rural Missouri. As a regional planner for the Boonslick Regional Planning Commission, covering three counties and 27 communities northwest of Columbia, I've seen COVID-19 cases and death rates skyrocket, local businesses struggle to survive, and residents crowd unemployment offices. Everyone is exhausted and burnt out, especially health care workers. Through all of this, I've tried my best to provide resources from emergency management grants to small business assistance to more personal protective equipment. It's stressful, but I am grateful to help my community.

Still, my ability to continue this work is constantly at risk. As an Indian native on a temporary visa, I have little security. Although I've lived in the U.S. for 14 years and applied for a green card in 2011, I'm stuck in a massive backlog. If I had simply been born in a different country, I'd likely be a citizen by now. That's because only 7% of green cards can go to citizens of any single country each year. The expected wait for those from populous India could be up to 150 years, according to the libertarian 501(c)(3) nonprofit Cato Institute. It's why I'm hoping the new Congress will take swift action and rethink this inequitable country cap.

Temporary status affects me in myriad ways. I have to reapply for my H-1B work visa every three years, and I'm never certain it will be renewed. If I wanted to change jobs, I'd have to go to the back of the green card line. And if I visit my family in India, I risk not being able to return to the U.S. If I lost my job, as so many have during this pandemic, I would lose everything: my income, my visa status, my home. I was born in India, but America has become my country.

My husband, an information technology consultant for Mastercard, is also on a temporary H-1B visa. It's hard to live in limbo like this. How do we buy a house and invest in our community when our status could be revoked at any moment? The past four years have been particularly stressful, with the Trump administration making approximately 400 changes to immigration policy, including limiting legal immigration and placing bans on H-1B workers.

The unfairness of the green card system has wide-reaching implications. My 17-year-old daughter came to the U.S. when she was in kindergarten. She's American in every sense of the word, but since she's on my visa, she risks losing her status as well. She wants to attend college here, but even though we've paid Missouri taxes for over a decade, she's ineligible for in-state tuition. After graduation, she will then get in the same 150-year line. She's at the top of her class and co-founded The Hidden Dream, an advocacy organization for young U.S. immigrants like herself. She wants to study data science and public policy. The United States would gain a lot

from a young professional like her, but she's currently considering Canadian schools as a backup plan.

I initially left India to pursue my Ph.D. in urban planning and architecture because of America's stellar education system. When I was hired as a regional planner, I was filling a need: My boss had struggled to fill my position for months. Not many people with my skills want to live in a rural area, where the resources are scarce and the pay lags behind cities. My husband's local position was also difficult to fill, requiring specialized skills in automation and robotics.

Highly-skilled workers like us bring countless benefits to the U.S., including job creation. Studies show that H-1B visas enable companies to hire more Americans and prevent them from outsourcing jobs abroad. Approximately 90% of H-1B applications are for jobs requiring high-level knowledge in science, technology and engineering. Millions of doses of COVID-19 vaccines are making their way across the country right now, and we have many immigrants to thank for that. The co-founder and chairman of Moderna was born in Lebanon. A husband and wife team behind the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine are children of Turkish immigrants, and the scientist who heads the federal government's vaccine initiative is from Morocco.

I feel honored to work for the people of this great country. I don't mind the scrutiny, paperwork or waiting in line. But when one line is 10 times longer than another, it prevents us from making our full contributions — and it discourages future generations from making their mark in America.

President Joe Biden said he plans to introduce legislation immediately that would alleviate the visa backlog, including exempting spouses and children of green card holders from quotas. That's a good start, but the new administration must press Congress on the country cap issue. Our green card system is broken, and it's past time we fix it.