

Policy Brief: How states can tap internationally trained health professionals in the U.S. to address healthcare shortages

Many states have taken steps to address healthcare shortages arising from the COVID-19 crisis, including changing licensing requirements to allow healthcare professionals trained outside the U.S. to practice on a temporary basis. Even before this crisis, however, many parts of the country faced healthcare shortages and disparities in access to high-quality medical services. Today, because of COVID-19, these shortages and the need for policy solutions to address them are even greater.

Research shows there is a robust pipeline of internationally trained talent waiting to contribute their lifesaving skills to America's health workforce. The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) estimates that there are 263,000 immigrants and refugees with health-related degrees in the U.S. who are currently working in low-skilled jobs, are unemployed, or are out of the labor force. Of those, more than 6 in 10 are internationally educated.ⁱ Across the country, many highly qualified professionals with extensive international healthcare training and clinical experience are unable to obtain licensure in the U.S. without meeting often onerous, time-consuming, and expensive requirements, including in some cases repeating years of training and clinical experience.

Recognizing this immense and underutilized talent pool, governors in several states have temporarily waived certain licensing requirements to bolster the pipeline of healthcare workers available to respond to the pandemic. In Nevada, Governor Sisolak issued **Emergency Directive 011**ⁱⁱ authorizing the waiver of licensing requirements for a wide range of medical service providers with training from another country, including doctors, nurses, and behavioral health professionals.ⁱⁱⁱ In Colorado, Governor Polis issued **Executive Order 2020-38**^{iv} creating pathways for internationally trained nurses and doctors to provide healthcare services in response to the pandemic. In New Jersey, Governor Murphy used his emergency authority to issue **Executive Order 112**^v allowing some immigrant doctors licensed outside the U.S. to join the fight against COVID-19, provided they have at least five years of clinical experience and have practiced within the past five years. Governor Whitmer in Michigan issued **Executive Order 2020-61**^{vi}, a similar executive order to the New Jersey policy expanding it to other healthcare professions. Other states, including New York^{vii} and Massachusetts^{viii}, have permitted international medical graduates to gain an emergency license before completing their U.S. residencies.

Building on these developments, states should now work to create long-term solutions to increasing healthcare capacity in underserved communities, while at the same time assisting internationally trained doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals to reenter the healthcare workforce. Prior to COVID-19, some states, including **Minnesota, Washington, California, Missouri, and Massachusetts**, had passed legislation to address disparities in access to licensure for internationally trained health professionals. Now, states should expand on existing legislation and develop new solutions where necessary. Specifically, states should consider:

- Ensuring parity in licensure requirements for all internationally trained healthcare professionals regardless of where they received their education and avoiding arbitrary and subjective measures of an individual's prior healthcare education;

- Developing standardized assessment and certification programs to assess the clinical readiness of internationally trained healthcare professionals, as part of the licensure process;
- Investing in career guidance and support services for internationally trained healthcare professionals seeking to gain licensure and enter the U.S. health workforce, as well as assistance in accessing non-licensed health occupations that leverage their training and skills (**Welcome Back Centers** based at community-based organizations and higher education institutions around the country are a useful service model);
- Funding dedicated to residency spots for international medical graduates in their states, to address the barriers IMGs face in obtaining the residency placements required for licensing;
- Providing conditional licenses for internationally trained nurses whose credentials are recognized by CGFNS International and who are participating in bridge programming to complete gaps in training and clinical requirements; and
- Convening a task force of representatives from health systems, higher education, nonprofit organizations, government, and internationally trained health professionals to examine barriers facing internationally trained health professionals seeking to enter the health sector and issue relevant findings and recommendations.

ⁱ Migration Policy Institute, "As U.S. Health-Care System Buckles under Pandemic, Immigrant & Refugee Professionals Could Represent a Critical Resource," (April 7, 2020), available at: www.migrationpolicy.org/news/us-health-care-system-coronavirus-immigrant-professionals-untapped-resource.

ⁱⁱ Nevada Declaration of Emergency Directive 011 (April 1, 2020) available at:

http://gov.nv.gov/News/Emergency_Orders/2020/2020-04-01_-_COVID-19_Declaration_of_Emergency_Directive_011/

ⁱⁱⁱ COVID-19 Declaration of Emergency Directive 011, (April 1, 2020), available at:

gov.nv.gov/News/Emergency_Orders/2020/2020-04-01_-_COVID-19_Declaration_of_Emergency_Directive_011/.

^{iv} Colorado Executive Order D 2020 038 (April 15, 2020) available at:

<https://www.colorado.gov/governor/sites/default/files/inline-files/D%202020%20038%20Medical%20Surge.pdf>

^v New Jersey Executive Order 112, (April 1, 2020), available at: nj.gov/infobank/eo/056murphy/pdf/EO-112.pdf.

^{vi} Michigan Executive Order 2020-61 (April 26, 2020) available at:

https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIEOG/2020/04/26/file_attachments/1436219/EO%202020-61%20Emerg%20order%20-%20scope%20of%20practice%20-%20re-issue.pdf

^{vii} New York Executive Order No. 202.10: Continuing Temporary Suspension and Modification of Laws Relating to the Disaster Emergency, (March 23, 2020), available at: <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/no-20210-continuing-temporary-suspension-and-modification-laws-relating-disaster-emergency>.

^{viii} Order Providing Accelerated Licensing of Physicians Educated in Foreign Medical Schools, (April 9, 2020), available at: <http://www.mass.gov/doc/april-9-2020-foreign-medical-doctors/download>.