Sept. 7, 2017: Advocacy spotlight on "Dreamers" bolster physician workforce, should be allowed to stay

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To help alleviate the physician shortage and improve access to care, Congress should move quickly to enact legislation that would allow those granted Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status—often dubbed “dreamers”—to live and work legally in the U.S. An estimated 5,400 previously ineligible physicians could be introduced into the U.S. health system over the coming decades through a DACA-like legislative fix.

That estimate was cited in a letter (PDF) to Congressional leaders by AMA Executive Vice President and CEO James L. Madara, MD. He noted there is already a shortage of 8,200 primary care physicians—according to the Health Resources and Services Administration—and that the Association of American Medical Colleges has projected the total physician shortage could grow to as many as 94,700 doctors by 2025.

"Removing those with DACA status will particularly create care shortages for rural and other underserved areas,” Dr. Madara wrote. "DACA physicians are more likely to work in high-need areas where communities face challenges in recruiting other physicians. DACA students are also more likely to be bilingual, to come from diverse cultural backgrounds, and to understand challenges in certain ethnic communities. Without these physicians, the AMA is concerned that the quality of care provided in these communities will be negatively impacted and that patient access to care will suffer.”

More than 100 students with DACA status applied to U.S. allopathic medical schools last year, he noted.

"Those who enrolled will now face uncertainty about completing their degrees, paying their student loans, and serving patients. Furthermore, if DACA residents are unable to complete their training, which typically spans three to six years after medical school, this could potentially waste graduate medical education funds, leave training slots unfilled, and generally exacerbate the physician shortage our country is facing, especially for our most vulnerable patients," Dr. Madara wrote. "The AMA believes that these DACA recipients should be able to continue to study, work and improve patient access to care without the fear and uncertainty of being deported before their training is
completed."

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