

AMA: Fix immigration issues so IMGs can help fight COVID-19

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What's the news: To ensure an adequate physician workforce to combat the COVID-19 epidemic, the AMA has urged immigration authorities to extend visas for foreign national physicians lawfully practicing in the U.S. and for the departments of state and homeland security to expedite visa processing to ensure that non-U.S. citizen international medical graduates (IMGs) can enter the country to begin their residency training programs on July 1.

The AMA is also strongly urging the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) to reconsider a March 20 decision to stop accepting petitions for “premium processing” of petitions for visa extensions and changes of status. Instead, the AMA urges an expansion of the premium processing to facilitate an expedited process for H-1B visas.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has compounded the urgency of these requests, the AMA has been advocating for years for the USCIS, a component of the Department of Homeland Security, to clear the backlog of cases of physicians practicing in the U.S. with H-1B visas seeking to obtain permanent resident status.

The AMA opposes policies that create unnecessary stress for IMG physicians and their families and exacerbate the physician workforce shortage by further limiting the ability of certain non-US citizen IMGs to receive a visa or green card.

Additionally, the AMA is calling on the State Department to open visa processing at embassies and consulates worldwide for physicians seeking to enter the U.S. to join residency programs this July.

Why it's important: The physicians involved “are crucial components of our health care workforce” as they often practice at academic medical centers and safety-net facilities that are on the front line of the COVID-19 pandemic and play a critical role in providing health care in areas of the country with higher rates of poverty and chronic disease, AMA Executive Vice President and CEO James L. Madara, MD, wrote in a letter to the USCIS.

Dr. Madara’s letter notes that individuals with serious chronic medical conditions, such as diabetes, are at a higher risk of experiencing serious complications from COVID-19. “Nearly 21 million people live in areas of the U.S. where foreign-trained physicians account for at least half of all physicians,” the letter adds.

In a separate letter, Dr. Madara urged the State Department and DHS to act so non-U.S. citizen IMGs “can either continue, or begin, to serve a vital role in caring for patients during the COVID-19 pandemic.”

“The AMA believes that any delay in the commencement of training programs will significantly compromise serving our nation’s most vulnerable patients at hundreds of academic medical centers and safety-net facilities across the U.S.,” Dr. Madara wrote in the letter to the State Department and DHS.

What’s next: The AMA called on the State Department to issue a public statement confirming that physicians with J-1 visas—that require IMGs to return to their home country for two years after their residency has ended before they can apply for another visa or green card—are permitted to be redeployed to new rotations within their host training institution as needed to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.