

AMA fighting for IMG physicians on several fronts with many allies

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What's the news: The nation needs all available physicians engaged in combating COVID-19. The AMA is working on several fronts with several partners to ensure that non-U.S. citizen international medical graduates (IMGs) practicing in the U.S. and individuals in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program can join the fight.

“Our health system desperately needs to deploy every physician, nurse and medical provider capable of responding,” wrote AMA President Patrice A. Harris, MD, MA, in a recent Leadership Viewpoints column. “The stakes are far too high not to take advantage of every available resource we have.”

AMA advocacy efforts include:

- Sending a letter to Vice President Mike Pence strongly urging the administration to exempt IMG physicians with J-1, H-1B and O-1 visas from any future immigration bans or limits so that these doctors can maintain their lawful non-immigrant status while practicing in the U.S. and responding to the urgent COVID-19 pandemic.
- Joining with more than 70 other health care organizations in sending a letter to Vice President Pence and Congressional leaders urging them to take regulatory and legislative action to maintain work authorization for those with DACA status during the COVID-19 public health emergency.
- Working with health care, business, immigration, and attorney organizations to support the bipartisan Healthcare Workforce Resilience Act that would capture unused visas from prior years and allocate them to doctors and nurses to alleviate the growing health care worker shortage.

“Physicians fighting COVID-19 are eager to hear these words: ‘Reinforcements are on the way,’” Dr. Harris said. “Recapturing 15,000 unused immigrant visas for physicians through the Healthcare Workforce Resilience Act would ease the burden on front-line physicians who are risking their lives in

understaffed hospitals.”

Similarly, in the letter to Pence regarding IMG physicians with J-1, H-1B and O-1 visas, AMA CEO and Executive Vice President James L. Madara, MD, noted the vital role IMG physicians are serving during the pandemic and how they are helping alleviate the physician shortage—especially in underserved regions.

“The U.S. health care workforce relies upon health professionals and scientists from other countries to provide high-quality and accessible patient care,” Dr. Madara wrote. “As such, during this pandemic, it is more critical than ever to ensure that the U.S. has a fair and efficient immigration system that strengthens the American health care system and advances the nation’s health security.”

The U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments on the DACA program last fall. The DACA letter urges Congress and the administration to retain the program regardless of the court’s decision and to support a bipartisan Senate bill and House of Representatives-passed legislation that would “allow undocumented young people to continue their employment, education, training, and research in the health professions.”

Why it’s important: The physician shortage that existed before the pandemic continues to become more severe while the need for caregivers is growing daily during the public health emergency. Physicians and other medical professionals who are available to help must be allowed to do so.

While physicians were exempt from an April 22 presidential executive order suspending the issuance of immigration visas, Dr. Madara’s letter notes that the order also called for a review of non-immigrant programs that could potentially affect physicians who hold J-1, H-1B, and O-1 non-immigrant visas.

“The AMA strongly urges the Administration to exempt J-1, H-1B, and O-1 physicians from any future immigration bans or limitations so that these physicians can begin or continue to provide health care to those U.S. patients battling COVID-19,” the letter states.

The DACA letter states that there are nearly 30,000 DACA recipients in the U.S. health care workforce. The AMA estimates this includes 200 active physicians, medical students and residents.

“The COVID-19 pandemic also illuminates longstanding social, economic, and health inequities in the United States that DACA can help address,” the letter states. “Health professionals with DACA status encompass a diverse, multiethnic population, who are often bilingual and more likely to practice in underserved communities.”

While the COVID-19 pandemic has compounded the urgency, the AMA has been advocating for years on physician visa issues. This includes opposing policies that create unnecessary stress for IMG physicians and their families and exacerbate the physician workforce shortage by limiting the

ability of certain non-US citizen IMGs to receive a visa or green card.

To learn more: A COVID-19 FAQ page offers guidance to IMG physicians and details AMA advocacy efforts on behalf of these professionals who are either currently licensed to practice in the U.S. or are seeking such licensure, and to help ensure that visa-related issues do not stop their ability to continue to care for patients during this challenging time.

News on all the AMA's COVID-19 advocacy efforts and guidance can be found in the AMA's COVID-19 resource center, which offers a library of resources from JAMA Network™, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the World Health Organization.