

ADDRESSING THE CAREGIVER SHORTAGE THROUGH IMMIGRATION REFORM

ISSUE

Additional workers from abroad are required to fill 120,000 caregiver vacancies in long-term care facilities. This crisis will escalate, according to estimations by the General Accounting Office (GAO), as facilities in the United States will need 800,000 additional nurse aides by the year 2008. Immigration reforms are necessary to help provide the adequate supply of caregivers critical to ensuring quality care for our nation's frail and elderly.

AHCA POSITION

The American Health Care Association (AHCA) urges Congress to provide the long-term care profession relief from its staffing crisis by increasing the number of legally permissible immigrant employees. This can be accomplished by increasing the number of visas allocated to registered nurses (RNs), licensed practical nurses (LPNs), and certified nurse aides (CNAs). AHCA supports the following:

1. Enactment of comprehensive immigration reform legislation that addresses current staffing shortages and recognizes the growing and continued need for additional nursing staff.
2. Create and / or expand a visa category for non-RN caregivers such as LPNs and CNAs.
3. Create and / or expand a visa category for registered nurses.

On a parallel track, we must stabilize the current workforce by ending employer sanctions that punish providers who unknowingly hire illegal aliens, and enact earned adjustment provisions providing immigrants an opportunity to achieve permanent resident status.

The Administration, via the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), can expedite the process by measuring the shortage of front-line caregivers, and reporting the data to the Department of Justice and the Department of Labor.

BACKGROUND

This long term care workforce crisis is a result of inadequate government financing limiting wages, the difficulty of caregiving jobs, and a decline in nursing school enrollments, and a shrinking applicant pool. Government-set payment rates have debilitated providers in their attempt to recruit and retain staff. Current funding levels do not allow competitive salaries for long term care staff. This crisis will worsen as the baby boomer population matures and starts to seek care because facilities will not have the staffing capabilities to afford them the high quality care they deserve.

An expansion of the skilled labor pool by granting visas to hire foreign caregivers is critical. Comprehensive immigration reforms that address admission requirements for nonimmigrant alien nurses and related immigrant status provisions allowing more immigrants to enter the long term care workforce are necessary.

A visa program specific to the long-term care workforce must be passed into law. Presently, there is no visa category for CNAs, who provide 80% of the direct care in nursing facilities. This is also the area where providers are struggling the most to meet the staffing needs of their residents. To create a stable labor pool for CNAs, Congress must enact a new visa category that allows essential workers to enter the country to fill openings in jobs that are not seasonal or temporary.

STATUS

AHCA continues ongoing discussions and lobbying efforts to urge enactment of immigration programs to address the shortage of skilled and unskilled caregivers. AHCA has also taken a leadership role in the Essential Worker Immigration Coalition (EWIC) and continues to work with policymakers to authorize the needed visas. Discussions are ongoing with key judiciary committee members and others in leadership on the hill, and the Administration, to address this crisis.

ACTION

Support comprehensive immigration reforms designed to expand existing visa categories, to bring in needed RNs, LPNs, and CNAs to fill the many vacancies giving long term care to our frail and elderly seniors.

Actively lobby Congress to introduce and enact a mechanism where the Secretary of Health and Human Services measures and certifies the nursing home worker shortage, and cooperates with INS and the Department of Justice to make needed caregiver visas available.

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