

U.S. Rep. Sensenbrenner: Introduces bill to alleviate doctor shortage in underserved communities

Posted on Friday, Jun 15, 2018

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Washington, D.C.—Today, Congressman Jim Sensenbrenner (WI-05) introduced legislation to address the shortage of qualified physicians. H.R. 6123, the Physician Visa Reform Act, clears the path for highly-trained foreign physicians to access temporary visas so they can practice in health professional shortage areas. Paired with changes to state law, H.R. 6123 will help residents of rural areas across Wisconsin access life-saving medical care.

Rep. Sensenbrenner: “Every community should be served by well-trained medical staff. This legislation is a commonsense solution to the very real problem of doctor shortages that affects vulnerable populations across the country.”

Problem:

Our nation’s health care system is becoming increasingly strained due, in part, to a lack of qualified doctors. Each year, more physicians retire while fewer medical students graduate to fill the vacancies. As studies have shown, medical students frequently practice in the area where they completed their residency – often in large cities – because they lack strong incentives to move to a shortage area.

Currently, federal law requires foreign physicians to complete a residency training program in the United States if they wish to practice here. While this policy is appropriate for younger, less experienced foreign doctors, it is unnecessary for

highly-experienced and well-trained foreign physicians. For instance, a Canadian physician with 20 years of specialized experience treating cancer patients should not be required to complete the same residency program as a physician who recently graduated from medical school. This current policy is time-consuming, unnecessary, and a disincentive for foreign physicians to relocate to the US.

Solution:

H.R. 6123 would reform the current visa program to allow highly-trained physicians to live and practice in an area designated by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as having a shortage of health care professionals for three years without having to complete a residency program.

Notably, the legislation maintains states' rights by allowing each state to maintain its own standards, requirements, and licensing board for physicians. In other words, when a foreign physician applies to work in a particular state, that state's licensing board will determine, based on its own criteria, if the applicant is qualified and therefore eligible. Such criteria could include: the candidate's country of origin, where the candidate graduated from medical school, how many years of experience the candidate has, if and what the physician's specialty is, and other relevant information the state deems appropriate.

Once a state determines that a physician is qualified, a visa may be granted through the same application process that is prescribed under current law.

After three years of service in a shortage area, the physician may apply for permanent resident status after completing the National Board of Medical Examiners Examination (the test that all medical students must pass to graduate medical school and become fully licensed). Upon successful completion of the exam and approval from the Department of Homeland Security, the physician may remain in the U.S. and practice anywhere they are qualified and licensed.