

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 27, 2020

The Honorable Mike Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

The Honorable Chad F. Wolf
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
245 Murray Lane, SW
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Secretary Pompeo and Acting Secretary Wolf:

We write concerning the suspension of routine visa services during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) emergency and the detrimental impact it may have on efforts to combat the pandemic. In particular, we fear that limiting J-1 and H-1B visas — which allow foreign students and medical professionals to live, study, and work in the United States — will further strain our nation’s hospitals and health care providers. We ask that you immediately lift the restrictions on the processing of those visas and take additional steps to allow foreign health care professionals to enter or remain in the United States to help in our fight against the pandemic.

As of March 18, 2020, the Department of State suspended routine visa services in most countries worldwide until further notice.¹ The suspension applies to all immigrant and non-immigrant visas, including J-1 Clinical and H-1B visas. Every year, thousands of medical students and medical professionals contribute to the U.S. health care system under these visa programs.²

As of March 26, 2020, Massachusetts had one of the nation’s largest coronavirus outbreaks, with 2,417 confirmed cases.³ Our hospitals, first responders, and state and local governments are doing everything they can to stem the spread of the disease and provide care to those suffering from the virus. But our medical system is under increasing strain as the outbreak spreads.⁴

¹ U.S. Department of State — Bureau of Consular Affairs, *Suspension of Routine Visa Services* (Mar. 20, 2020), <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/News/visas-news/suspension-of-routine-visa-services.html>.

² *Exchange Visitor Program Facts and Figures*, State Department Exchange Visitor Program. (Mar. 20, 2020), <https://j1visa.state.gov/basics/facts-and-figures/>.

³ *COVID-19 Cases, Quarantine and Monitoring*, Mass.gov (Mar. 24, 2020), <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-cases-quarantine-and-monitoring>.

⁴ *Coronavirus Live Blog: 2 more COVID-19 deaths bring death toll to 11 in Mass.; total cases in state up to 1,159*, Boston 25 News. (Mar. 24, 2020), <https://www.boston25news.com/news/coronavirus-live-blog-9-deaths-777-confirmed-cases-covid-19-reported-mass/WUF4Z3XGGVDVBES6E3WMOCJYRQ/>

The Graduate Medical Education workforce is critical to the function of U.S. academic medical centers. Though the residents and fellows that comprise this workforce are referred to as trainees, they are the backbone of bedside patient care, and are critical to our ability to provide high quality medical care. They cannot be replaced. A significant proportion of the workforce in U.S. academic medical centers are foreign doctors who require a visa to work, including, for example, 25 percent of medical residents and fellows at Tufts Medical Center in Boston.⁵

On March 20, 2020, the National Resident Matching Program (NRMP) announced its results, starting the clock on “onboarding season” in the medical community.⁶ Over the next fourteen weeks, academic medical centers must onboard the trainees who are scheduled to replace those graduating at the end of June 2020. In 2020, more than 4,200 of these doctors will require visas. Any delays in processing these individuals’ visas means that U.S. hospitals will not have a full complement of physicians to care for patients starting July 1, 2020.⁷

The city of Boston, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and our country cannot afford to delay visa processing for health care providers. We must be proactive and work towards a seamless July 1, 2020 transition. Indeed, foreign doctors may require additional time to fully transition to their new positions if they face quarantine after traveling to the United States from abroad.

We therefore ask that the Departments of State and Homeland Security take the following steps to ensure that we can utilize the talent and expertise of health care professionals who are practicing or otherwise lawfully present in the United States on a visa or other protected status, or seeking to gain admittance on a visa:

1. Immediately exempt from the J-1 and H-1B visa suspension the processing of applications from those with medical or scientific expertise who can be deployed in the fight against coronavirus.
2. Continue and expand the H-1B premium processing option for exempted applications.
3. Through the duration of the COVID-19 national emergency, temporarily extend visas and other protected status for physicians and medical residents.
4. Expedite approvals of extensions and changes of status for physicians and medical residents practicing or otherwise lawfully present in the United States.

⁵ *Foreign-Trained Doctors are Critical to Serving Many U.S. Communities*, American Immigration Council (Jan. 17, 2018), <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/foreign-trained-doctors-are-critical-serving-many-us-communities>

⁶ Press Release, The Match, Match Week to Reveal Future for More Than 40,000 Resident Physician Applicants (Mar. 24, 2020).

⁷ Helen Branswell, *As Coronavirus Spreads Thousands of Foreign Doctors Could be Blocked from U.S. Entry, Group Warns*, STAT News (Mar. 23, 2020), https://www.statnews.com/2020/03/23/as-coronavirus-spreads-thousands-of-foreign-doctors-could-be-blocked-from-u-s-entry-group-warns/?utm_source=STAT+Newsletters&utm_campaign=fd314cc27e-MR_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_8cab1d7961-fd314cc27e-151956193

5. Resume — as emergency and mission-critical visa services — visa processing at embassies and consulates worldwide for physicians and medical residents, consistent with the safety of our personnel who perform these functions.
6. Allow physicians and medical residents (including those on J-1 and H-1B visas, such as participants in the Conrad 30 program) to be redeployed as needed to respond the COVID-19 pandemic.

These steps can help ensure that we utilize the expertise and talent of foreign doctors and medical professionals who can assist in the fight against coronavirus. As U.S. medical centers work tirelessly to handle the surge in health care needs during this crisis, it is imperative that we do everything we can to fully staff these facilities.

Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter. We look forward to your timely response.

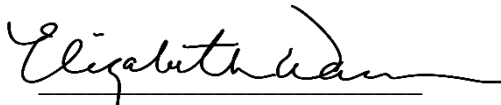
Sincerely,



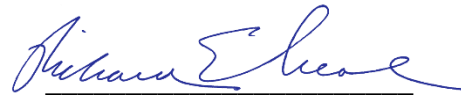
Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Ayanna Pressley
Member of Congress



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



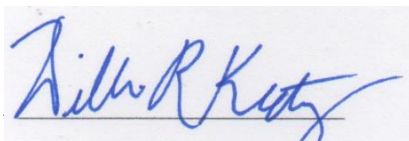
Richard E. Neal
Member of Congress



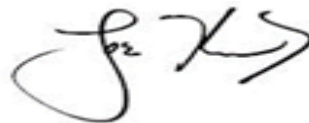
James P. McGovern
Member of Congress



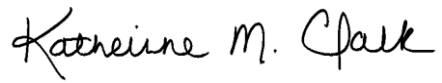
Stephen F. Lynch
Member of Congress



William Keating
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Katherine Clark
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Seth Moulton
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Lori Trahan
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