

May 1, 2020

Kenneth Cuccinelli, JD
Acting Director U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
20 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20529

Dear Acting Director Cuccinelli:

On behalf of the undersigned psychiatric organizations we are writing to urge the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to temporarily extend visas automatically for one year, resume the premium processing that was put on hold on March 20, 2020, and expedite approvals of extensions and changes of status for non-U.S. citizen international medical graduates (IMGs) practicing, or otherwise lawfully present, in the U.S. The ability of resident and fellow psychiatric physicians and their families to continue to live and work in the United States is threatened by this recent federal immigration directive.

We are in an unprecedented time during this public health pandemic, when resident and fellow psychiatric physicians have been redeployed in numerous parts of the country to care for medically-ill COVID-19 patients, due to physician shortages. IMGs can play an important role in providing care in COVID-19 hot spots. As we move forward, this ongoing crisis highlights the need for significant investment to address the nation's critical psychiatrist workforce shortage, in addition to the current and projected overall physician workforce shortage. According to recent dataⁱ from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, of the 47.6 million adults with a mental illness, only 43.3% of them received any form of mental health care in the past year, while only 11.1% of the people aged 12 or older who required substance use treatment, received it at a facility specializing in addiction medicine.

A persistent shortage of psychiatrists and other mental health professionals contributes to the access problem in many areas, particularly rural areas. According to the Health Resources and Services Administrationⁱⁱ, by 2030 the supply of adult psychiatrists is expected to decrease by 20%, while the demand for their services is expected to increase by 3%, leaving a shortage of over 12,000 fully-trained psychiatrists. IMGs are a critical means to help fill this gap, as approximately 30% of active psychiatristsⁱⁱⁱ are IMGs. These IMGs graduate to work in underserved and rural areas to meet their waiver requirements before applying for permanent resident status.

In addition, we urge the Administration to protect the spouses and dependent children of our H-1B physicians by automatically granting a one-year extension of their H-4 visas so that the families of practitioners working to better U.S. patients' lives, are not separated during the pandemic.

We urge the Administration to act promptly in order to not hurt patient care, and institute the recommendations outlined above, as our healthcare system and our mental health care system

need them to continue to provide mental health and substance use services during this unprecedented time in history without fear of the loss of their, or their dependents', immigration statuses.

We urge the Administration to act promptly in order to not harm or interrupt ongoing patient care. The temporary extension of these visas will allow for our health care system to maintain mental health and substance use services provided by IMGs during this unprecedented time, without fear of loss of their and their dependents' immigration status.

Sincerely,

American Psychiatric Association
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
American Academy of Addiction Psychiatry
American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry
American Psychoanalytic Association
American Society for Adolescent Psychiatry
Academy of Consultation-Liaison Psychiatry
Association of Medicine and Psychiatry
American Association for Emergency Physicians
American Group Psychotherapy Association
Senior Psychiatrists Organization

cc: Secretary Alex Azar, Department of Health and Human Services
Department of State Waiver Review Division

ⁱSAMHSA, "Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health", available at: <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018.pdf> (August 2019).

ⁱⁱ HRSA, "Behavioral Health Workforce Projections: 2017-2030", available at: <https://bhw.hrsa.gov/sites/default/files/bhw/nchwa/projections/bh-workforce-projections-fact-sheet.pdf>.

ⁱⁱⁱ American Association of Medical Colleges, "Active Physicians Who Are International Medical Graduates (IMGs) by Specialty, 2017", available at: <https://www.aamc.org/data-reports/workforce/interactive-data/active-physicians-who-are-international-medical-graduates-imgs-specialty-2017>.