

Massachusetts Urged to Unlock Pool of Foreign Care Workers

By Katie Lannan

State House News Service

Lawmakers are calling on Gov. Charlie Baker to let health care professionals trained in other countries join the state's COVID-19 fight, and a recent Board of Registration in Medicine move will allow some international medical graduates who've also trained in the U.S. to receive temporary licenses here.

As Massachusetts prepares for a surge in coronavirus cases and the corresponding demand for medical care and supplies, the state has taken a series of steps aimed at augmenting the available health care workforce.

Health care providers licensed in other states can receive a Massachusetts license that will be valid during the state of emergency, and physicians who have retired within the past year can have their licenses reactivated. Medical schools have graduated this year's classes early, field hospitals are being set up in Boston and in Worcester, and a new online portal allows health care professionals to volunteer to assist with the pandemic response.

On Friday, 45 state lawmakers wrote to Baker, asking him to expand on these efforts by granting temporary licenses to health care personnel who are licensed in good standing in other countries.

"We believe that our trained, skilled, and licensed immigrant neighbors â€" many of whom may want to contribute to the Commonwealth's COVID-19 response â€" have always been and continue to be an untapped resource," reads the letter, led by Sen. Jo Comerford and Rep. Mindy Domb. "For example, there are thousands of immigrant doctors who, despite having passed the

U.S. exams, were not matched with a residency program in the United States and as such are unable to fulfill state licensing requirements.”

Comerford is the Senate chair of the Public Health Committee, and the letter is also signed by Consumer Protection and Professional Licensure Committee chairs Sen. Paul Feeney and Rep. Tackey Chan, and the heads of the Labor and Workforce Development Committee, Senate chair Sen. Patricia Jehlen and House vice-chair Rep. Stephan Hay. Rep. Carlos Gonzalez, the chair of the Massachusetts Black and Latino Legislative Caucus, is also among the signatories.

The letter also seeks assurance that health care providers from Puerto Rico are considered eligible for licensing here, like those from other states.

State lawmakers have contemplated the issue of licensure for foreign-trained medical professionals before.

This year’s budget, which Baker signed on July 31, 2019, created a 23-member commission of government and health care officials, giving them until July 2021 to study potential barriers in the licensure process and report on “strategies to integrate foreign-trained medical professionals into rural and underserved areas in need of medical services.”

According to the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition, which has three seats on the panel, the commission had been planning – before the coronavirus upended much of daily life – to start meeting early this year after background checks on its members were completed.

When the commission was created, MIRA said that more than 20 percent of the over 8,000 doctors, nurses, pharmacists, mental health providers and other medical professionals in Massachusetts who were educated abroad are unemployed or underemployed because of difficulties getting licensed in the U.S.

On Friday, MIRA launched a survey of such foreign-trained professionals, gauging their interest in assisting with the COVID-19 response.

Preliminary results shared Monday with the News Service showed that 47 percent of the initial 34 respondents would be interested in assisting in the medical response, even as an unpaid volunteer, and about 18 percent were interested in helping out if they would get paid for the work. Another 20 percent said it would depend on what they would be asked to do. Thirty-three respondents said they were not licensed in the U.S. but had an active license in another country, and one person was licensed in another state.

Solomon Kaffa, who trained as a doctor in Ethiopia and emigrated to the U.S. in 2016, said he's been feeling a sense of hopelessness "sitting on the sidelines" while reading headlines about doctor and nurse shortages. He replied to the MIRA survey, the state's online volunteer portal and other surveys, looking for opportunities to help.

"I've been trying to get back in there and volunteer," he said in a phone interview. "I've been seeing how health care professionals have been swamped by this pandemic."

Kaffa said it's "very difficult" to find medical jobs in the U.S., without going through a traditional American medical school program. He said he has experience working in settings with limited resources, which could translate to the current environment where personal protective equipment is scarce, along with clinical skills he could put to use.

"I know I can definitely help out in this response, in any capacity," he said.

On March 17, the Massachusetts Board of Registration in Medicine put in place an Emergency Temporary License for physicians who have completed their postgraduate training, including both graduates from the U.S. and international

medical graduates.

George Zachos, the board's executive director, said in a statement that international medical graduates must have completed three years of postgraduate training that is accredited by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education, American Osteopathic Association-approved or accredited in Canada, in order to qualify for the emergency license.

Other states have taken different approaches.

In New York, a March 23 executive order from Gov. Andrew Cuomo allows graduates of foreign medical schools who are not licensed in the state if they have completed at least one year of graduate medical education in the U.S.

New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy signed an executive order on April 1, authorizing his state's Division of Consumer Affairs to issue temporary medical licenses to doctors who are licensed and in good standing in other countries, along with other workforce measures.

"By signing this executive order, we are removing bureaucratic roadblocks to quickly bring more health care professionals into our efforts and provide additional flexibility and protections for our front line responders to aid in New Jersey's response to COVID-19," Murphy said in a statement.

The lawmakers who wrote to Baker cited Murphy's order and recommended "that Massachusetts authorize similar licensing, but include nurses, respiratory therapists and other medical professionals as well."