

Support Policies for Frontline Clinicians during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Help U.S. and International Medical Graduates Provide Care

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Background

The COVID-19 global pandemic is taking a toll on virtually all aspects of the U.S. economy and health care system. The virus is testing the resolve of the medical community not only in how to treat and respond to the disease but in how to ensure timely access to care. Primary care physicians, including internal medicine specialists, are serving on the frontlines of patient care during this pandemic with increasing demands placed on them. Many physicians are being asked to come out of retirement to provide care, and there is an increasing reliance on medical graduates, both U.S. and international, to serve on the frontlines in this fight against COVID-19.

Frontline Physician Workforce: According to the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), before the Coronavirus crisis, estimates were that there would be a shortage of 21,400 to 55,200 primary care physicians by 2033. Now, with the specter of closure for many physician practices or near-retirement physicians not returning to the workforce due to COVID-19, it is even more imperative to assist those clinicians serving on the frontlines. Many residents and medical students are playing a critical role in responding to the COVID-19 crisis. Residents and graduated medical students have an average debt of over \$200,000, yet will not necessarily be supported by other programs that provide direct financial support to hospitals and other physicians. In addition, international medical graduates (IMGs) are currently serving on the frontlines of the U.S. health care system, both under J-1 and H-1B training visas and in other forms. These physicians serve an integral role in the delivery of health care in the United States. IMGs help to meet a critical workforce need by providing health care for underserved populations in the United States. They are often more willing than their U.S. medical graduate counterparts to practice in remote, rural areas and in poor underserved urban areas. More must be done to support their vital role in health care delivery in the United States.

Several bills have been introduced in Congress that would assist frontline clinicians as they provide care during the pandemic. These bills help with medical student loan forgiveness and support IMGs and their families by temporarily easing immigration-related restrictions so IMGs and other critical health care workers can enter the U.S. to train in internal medicine residency programs, to assist in the fight against COVID-19, and to provide a pathway to permanent residency status. ACP is urging support and passage of these bills:

- **Conrad State 30 and Physician Access Reauthorization Act (S. 948):** This bill allows states to sponsor foreign-trained physicians to work in medically underserved areas in exchange for a waiver of the physicians' two-year foreign residence requirement. It increases the base number of annual Conrad waivers available to each state from 30 to 35, with a demand-based sliding scale to determine the number of available waivers in future years, and includes a provision to address the current backlog in the system for physicians on J-1 visas who wish to acquire permanent residency status (green card).
- **Healthcare Workforce Resilience Act (S. 3599):** This bill would authorize immigrant visas for health care clinicians, including up to 15,000 physicians who are eligible to practice in the United States or are already in the country on temporary work visas. The visas would provide a pathway to employment based green cards. View ACP's [letter](#) of support to Congress on S. 3599.
- **The Student Loan Forgiveness for Frontline Health Workers Act (H.R. 6720):** This bill would forgive student loans for physicians and other clinicians who are on the frontlines of providing care to COVID-19 patients or helping the health care system cope with the COVID-19 public health emergency.

Congressional Environment

Congress has already passed four legislative packages to address the COVID-19 crisis, and they have been signed into law. Additional COVID-related legislation is under discussion and development in both chambers and could be voted on in the near future.

Request of Congress

As Congress develops additional legislation to address the COVID-19 crisis, ACP urges inclusion of the following policies to assist those clinicians on the frontlines providing care during this pandemic:

- Include in COVID-related legislation the Conrad State 30 and Physician Access Reauthorization Act (S. 948) and the Healthcare Workforce Resilience Act (S. 3599). These bills support the COVID-19 response workforce by expediting visas for international medical graduates (IMGs) to enter the U.S. for training and patient care, permanently authorizing the Conrad 30 Program, and providing a pathway for IMGs and their families already in the U.S to obtain permanent residency status.
- Include in COVID-related legislation the Student Loan Forgiveness for Frontline Health Workers Act (H.R. 6720). This bill would forgive student loans for physicians and other clinicians who are on the frontlines of providing care to COVID-19 patients or helping the health care system cope with the COVID-19 public health emergency.