Guest Worker Bill Alleviates Workforce Shortage for Skilled Nursing Providers

Long term care facilities, including centers that serve individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, across the nation are ready, willing, and able to offer tens of thousands of good-paying jobs that, if filled, will help boost the quality of care for people with disabilities, the frail, and elderly Americans. Unfortunately, our nation’s health care system continues to experience a shortage of trained caregivers for these critical jobs.

The high demand for long term care workers has been well documented by the federal government and by the American Health Care Association/National Center for Assisted Living (AHCA/NCAL). A study by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (HHS) and the Department of Labor (DOL) estimates between 5.7 million and 6.5 million nurses, nurse aides, home health, and personal care workers will need to care for the 27 million Americans who will require long term care in 2050.

Additionally, there remains a gap in the current immigration system that ignores the necessity of non-seasonal workers in roles that are not multi-year, highly-skilled positions. Workplace roles such as direct care staff are chronically overlooked despite the current worker shortage and massive future need.

The current temporary and permanent visa programs are insufficient and inadequate to accommodate the needs of U.S. health care providers. The permanent residence program provides approximately 5,000 annual visas for essential workers. Clearly, current programs cannot handle our continuing need for foreign-born, essential workers.

To address this crisis, legislation was introduced last Congress. The Willing Workers and Willing Employers Act of 2016 (S.2827) creates a pilot guest worker program designed to address the gap that currently exists between temporary visa programs for seasonal workers and the H-1B visa program for highly skilled immigrants. It functions on a flexible cap ranging from 65,000 to 85,000 registered positions a year to match economic demand and has strict requirements that employers must seek an available U.S. worker before hiring a guest worker under this program.

AHCA/NCAL believes that new immigration laws should serve the needs of the U.S. economy and that policy remedies to address immediate needs should be pursued. Given the current nurse shortage nationwide, AHCA/NCAL supports S. 2827, and urges Congress to quickly reintroduce this bill in the 115th Congress to address the pressing worker shortages in the health care profession. A long-standing member of the Essential Worker Immigration Coalition (EWIC), AHCA is one of 37 organizations that have worked closely with key Congressional members to shape and draft practical immigration reform legislation.

Recruiting, training, and retaining caregiving staff are the biggest challenges facing long term care centers today. This bill creates a guest worker program with a smart, market-based approach that will meet the care needs of our residents and patients. If you have any questions, please contact AHCA’s Chris Donnellan at (202) 898-6316 or cdonnellan@ahca.org.