

How Visa Policies Help Address Health Care Workforce Shortages and Advance Medical Breakthroughs

For more than 40 years, the U.S. has authorized a limited number of international students, trainees, and postdoctoral scholars to train and deliver high-quality health care across the U.S., including in rural and underserved areas, and conduct groundbreaking medical research through the temporary nonimmigrant J-1 “exchange visitor” or H-1B “specialty occupation” visa programs.

Far from displacing U.S. workers, these highly educated and extensively vetted visa holders serve as an important complement within our health workforce, helping to fill gaps in the shortage. To ensure the U.S. maintains a pipeline of the world’s most talented health care professionals and medical researchers, our nation’s policies must reflect the realities of graduate medical education (GME) training, doctoral-level educational opportunities, and the vital role of postdoctoral scholars in the biomedical research enterprise.

Relieving the Strained Health Care Workforce

Facing a persistent physician shortage of up to 86,000 by 2036¹, the U.S. needs exceptional health care providers to address an impending crisis. However, there are not enough U.S. physicians to meet the nation’s critical health care needs in spite of significant domestic training efforts. **International health care professionals in the U.S. under the J-1 and H-1B visa programs are essential to addressing health care workforce shortages, advancing medical breakthroughs, and delivering care to communities in need.**

International Medical Graduates (IMGs) make up nearly 25 percent of the physician workforce. They often work in areas severely affected by physician shortages, improving patient health in both rural and underserved urban communities². For independent practice eligibility, IMG physicians generally must complete some training in an approved U.S.-based residency program. States with some of the most Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs), such as Texas and Florida, have among the highest percentages of non-citizen GME trainees.^{3,4}

BY THE NUMBERS

More than **15,900 J-1 resident and fellow physicians** serve patients at nearly **770 teaching hospitals** nationwide,⁵ and over **11,000 physicians** are sponsored through H-1B visas.²

Aiding Global Leadership in Medical Research

Talented international students and postdoctoral scholars also train in our biomedical research facilities to develop cures and treatments, making the U.S. a global leader in biomedical research. International visa holders account for a significant share of biomedical research scholars contributing to the U.S. medical research enterprise.

24% of research doctorate recipients and 59% of postdoctoral scholars in the biological and biomedical sciences are temporary visa holders, according to National Science Foundation research.

¹ AAMC. New AAMC Report Shows Continuing Projected Physician Shortage. March 21, 2024. <https://www.aamc.org/news/press-releases/new-aamc-report-shows-continuing-projected-physician-shortage>

² Liu M, Patel VR, Ramesh T, Vyas DA, Wadhwa RK. Health Care Professionals Sponsored for H-1B Visas in the US. JAMA. 2025;334(22):2035–2038. doi:10.1001/jama.2025.20931

³ AAMC. U.S. Physician Workforce Data Dashboard. <https://www.aamc.org/data-reports/report/us-physician-workforce-data-dashboard>



⁴ Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). Health Workforce Explorer. <https://data.hrsa.gov/topics/health-workforce/nchwa/health-workforce-explorer>

⁵ Inthealth. J-1 Visa Sponsorship Top Nations of Origin, 2024. Data current as of January 12, 2025. <https://www.inthealth.org/pdfs/EVSP-Physicians-Country-2024.pdf>

Understanding Visa Types for Academic Medicine

Congress, state health departments, the Veterans Administration (VA), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), regional commissions, and other entities have all recognized the national interest served by international physicians who practice in areas with shortages of physicians and other health care professionals.

While most resident and fellow physicians from other countries enter the U.S. for residency training on J-1 visas, they can also train on H-1B visas. In addition to physicians, medical researchers, postdoctoral scholars, and other health professionals use these visas to address gaps in the U.S. health care and research workforce. The H-1B program helps stabilize access to care in high-need communities rather than displacing U.S. hires. It is commonly used by health care systems to employ fully trained physicians who have passed U.S. licensing examinations and met state licensure requirements.²

Visa Type	 J-1 Exchange Visitors	 H-1B Specialty Occupations
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individuals involved in approved educational exchange programs, such as teaching, studying, conducting research, or receiving graduate medical education training. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professionals in specialty occupations that require at least a U.S. bachelor's degree or the equivalent.
Visa Duration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Program duration (3-7 years, depending on the program). J-1 physicians can exceed the standard 7-year program limit by demonstrating that their home country has an "exceptional need" for their added qualifications. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 years (may be extended up to 6 years) Employers need to file an extension petition with USCIS before the status expires, ideally six months prior. A 240-day automatic work authorization applies if filed on time. H-1B status can be extended beyond the initial 6-year limit if sufficient progress has been made towards obtaining a green card.
Cap on Annually Issued Visas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> None 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limit of 85,000 new H-1B visas per year, including 20,000 visas reserved for U.S. advanced degree holders. H-1B Physicians working at institutions of higher education, teaching hospitals, and many academic health system facilities are exempt from the cap. Physicians with service-based J waivers are also exempt.
Home Residency Requirement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Must return to home country for two years following GME training, unless approved for a waiver. A J-1 physician may change to H-1B status when approved for a Conrad 30 waiver or other service-based waivers, under which IMGs commit to 3 years of work in a medically underserved community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> None
Academic Medicine Occupation Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primarily utilized by resident physicians, fellows and postdoctoral scholars, though also used by some other researchers and professors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physicians, resident physicians, fellows, physician scientists, postdoctoral scholars, basic science faculty, research staff, clinical research faculty.
U.S. Interested Government Agencies (IGA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A few IGAs will also recommend a physician for a J waiver, including through the HHS Clinical J Waiver Program and Research J Waiver Program. The DOD, the VA, and regional commissions also recommend service-based J waivers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> None