

Wait for Foreign-Born Nurses is Getting Longer

John Commins, for HealthLeaders Media, March 16, 2009

The United States faces a critical lack of nurses in every corner of the nation. The U.S. Labor Department reports that the nation has an immediate shortage of 126,000 nurses. By some estimates, that shortage will grow to 500,000 nurses in seven years. Yet, it has never been more difficult than now for foreign-born nurses to get green cards.

"Right now it's looking like a little more than six years. That has got to be a record," says Carl Shusterman, an immigration lawyer in Los Angeles. "In the 30-something years I've practice immigration law it's never been that long."

Shusterman cites a March 9 visa bulletin from the U.S. State Department that lists waiting times for various categories of immigrants. As of April 1, 2009, the bulletin states, green card processing times for nurses and other immigrants in the EB-3 visa category will increase from four years to more than six years.

This is particularly tough news for the healthcare sector because—unlike just about every other sector of skilled labor—there is no temporary visa category for nurses. Hospitals and other healthcare entities have to apply directly for the green card on the nurses' behalf, and the six-year wait begins, even for nurses who've been educated at U.S. nursing schools.

Aileen Lange, manager of recruitment at White Memorial Medical Center, an Adventist hospital in East Los Angeles, says the 350-bed hospital needs help, but has stopped petitioning for foreign-born nurses because the wait is too long. "It's very painful for us," Lange says. "We really try to find as many nurses locally from our various schools, and schools associated with this hospital and through our religious affiliation. We go to regular job fairs. We go everywhere. It's become such a competitive environment that nurses will change hospitals for a little bit more money. We find the foreign nurses are a little more loyal."

White Memorial has about 700 RNs on staff or serving in other capacities and has about 20 vacancies to fill right now. To comply with California's strict staffing ratios, and with nowhere else to turn, White Memorial has hired temporary nurses.

"It's not that they're bad nurses, but they don't have the same commitment. They also make a tremendous amount more money and that causes a lot of dissention among the staff," Lange says. In addition, temporary nurses are a temporary fix. "It's like putting your finger in a dam. It fixes it for a moment but doesn't solve the problem," she says.