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# NATIONAL RURAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION

July 13, 2021

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken  
United States Secretary of State  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

On behalf of the National Rural Health Association (NRHA), I respectfully request that the United States Department of State address the backlog of immigrant visas for eligible foreign-trained nurses who are absolutely essential, now more than ever, for the delivery of high-quality health care to rural Americans.

NRHA is a non-profit membership organization with more than 21,000 members that provides national leadership on rural health issues. Our membership includes nearly every component of rural America's health care, including rural community hospitals, Critical Access Hospitals (CAHs), doctors, nurses and patients. We provide leadership on rural health issues through advocacy, communications, education, and research. Through this role, we have a unique insight into workforce needs which have been exacerbated by the pandemic and continue to plague our rural communities

**We request that the State Department place registered nurses seeking immigrant visas in the First Tier of the Department's current priority for processing.** We understand that, since the priority structure is not based on statute or regulation, it can be altered at the discretion of the State Department. Through this mechanism, the Department is in a unique position to alleviate the pressing burden placed on our rural health care facilities and thus continue its work of protecting our fellow Americans.

Prior to the pandemic, nursing workforce was already a major need in rural communities. America's rural population is aging, leading to both increased health care needs for nurses and an aging workforce. With HRSA's estimates indicating that one third of current nurses will retire in the next 10-15 years,<sup>1</sup> and the acknowledgment that these issues are more prevalent in rural communities,<sup>2</sup> it has become necessary over the past several years to explore more creative solutions to filling the ranks of rural healthcare workers. The pandemic has strained an already diminishing rural workforce, and the impending built up demand for care, promises to push rural America ever closer to a breaking point.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK493175/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ruralhealthweb.org/getattachment/Advocate/Policy-Documents/HealthCareWorkforceDistributionandShortageJanuary2012.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US>

Since the Department of Labor (DOL) has recognized that we will not be able to shore up the workforce with domestically trained nurses, the role of foreign trained nurses is even more important.

**Foreign-trained nurses, who meet strict eligibility requirements, are experiencing exceptional visa processing delays and need to be prioritized.** In order to be eligible for this program, nurses must be approved by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service, pass the U.S. nursing licensing exam, graduate from a university equivalent to a U.S. nursing school, pass an English fluency exam, and have a record free of any ethical violations. Not only do these nurses represent a solution to the overall workforce shortage, but they are also perfectly poised to help where we need it. According to our information, up to 68% of these nurses, once issued visas, are placed in rural areas. These are highly qualified healthcare professionals waiting in line to come help where we need it most.

**NRHA endorses the prioritization of visa issuance for eligible foreign trained nurses.** The shift of these nurses from Tier Four to Tier One will expedite the equilibration of health disparities across not only rural/urban divides, but throughout the country. The prioritization system for visa applicants exists (in part) to prioritize professions necessary for the continued success and prosperity of the United States, and right now nurses are absolutely essential to this mission. In combination with efforts to expand nursing education, these measures can provide a solution to both the short term and long-term nursing workforce shortage and thus work to alleviate the disparities exposed and exacerbated by the COVID pandemic.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Carrie Cochran-McClain at [ccochedran@nrharural.org](mailto:ccochedran@nrharural.org). Thank you for your continued efforts to protect and elevate the country we all hold dear. We look forward to working with you to reach a swift conclusion to the issues pressing on the collective conscience of our great nation.

Sincerely,



Alan Morgan  
Chief Executive Officer  
National Rural Health Association