

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-3304

August 20, 2024

Patrick J. Lechleitner
Acting Director
Immigration and Customs Enforcement
500 12th St SW
Washington, DC 20536

Dear Acting Director Lechleitner,

I write to respectfully nominate nursing as a degree eligible for the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math Optional Practical Training (STEM OPT) extension. By including nursing in STEM OPT, hospital centers in my district and across the country would directly reap the benefits.

At Duke University Hospital for instance, many registered nurses (RN) begin their nursing career as foreign nationals who have obtained their nursing education within the United States. These RNs are primarily on F-1 student visas and have a 1-year OPT work authorization. Currently, there is no additional pathway for further work authorization for these RNs, who are now highly trained and specialized nurses working in the hospital. As a result, these RNs are forced to resign from their position creating critical vacancies, and these vacancies are often filled by less experienced RNs out of necessity as hospitals have to fill these positions as quickly as possible to continue meeting patient needs.

The American Organization of Nursing Leadership estimates the turnover costs to be at least \$40,000 per RN. Due to the extreme USCIS backlogs, sponsoring these RNs for Lawful Permanent Residency (LPR) is not currently an effective retention strategy. Including nursing as an eligible field for the STEM OPT extension would allow these US-trained and actively working RNs to remain in their positions for an additional 2 years beyond their initial OPT. This extension would in turn give enough time for organizations like Duke Health to better utilize LPR sponsorship as a long-term retention strategy for these nurses.

This is not just the case for Duke and other hospitals in our district. Hospitals across the country face this retention challenge that directly impacts patient care. We can address this shortage and keep nurses here who were educated in the United States and already in the workforce by extending STEM OPT eligibility to include them. I stand ready to answer any questions and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Valerie P. Foushee
Member of Congress