

Visa change means fewer rural doctors

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Congressional changes to U.S. visa laws intended to help companies hire skilled workers have made it hard for rural areas to find doctors.

The Wall Street Journal reported Friday many foreign doctors no longer get a J-1 visa, which gave them eligibility for a green card if they spent three years practicing in a medically underserved area. Instead, they obtain an H1-B visa, which doesn't require them to spend time in a rural area, the Wall Street Journal reported.

The newspaper said the number of foreign physicians in the United States on a J-1 visa has fallen to 6,000 in 2005-2006, from nearly 11,000 in 1995-1996.

"It's a life-and-death situation," Rep. Jerry Moran, R-Kansas, told the Wall Street Journal.

The newspaper said the situation was a result of a 2000 change in the visa laws that lifted the number of H1-B visas granted.

On top of putting in long hours, working in a rural area doesn't offer doctors the opportunities to practice their specialties or use new technology, the newspaper said.

"It's like serving jail time," Minoo Kavarana, a Mumbai native and heart surgeon working in London, Ky., on a J-1 waiver, said.

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