



Illinois' Trailblazing Solution to Doctor Shortages:

Opening Doors for Immigrant, Refugee, and Asylee Healthcare Professionals

November 2023

Overview

As U.S. health systems grapple with the enduring effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, a larger looming challenge is on the rise: our drastic shortage of healthcare professionals. The American Hospital Association predicts a shortage of over 3.2 million healthcare workers by 2026 including nurses, nurse assistants, lab technicians, respiratory therapists, and other support positions. At the same time, nearly 99 million people in the U.S. are living in an area with a shortage of physicians or designated primary care professionals, with the shortfall predicted to reach 37,800 to 124,000 physicians by 2034. Without sufficient qualified professionals at every level, our health systems are left ill-prepared to care for our aging population, and our communities are becoming increasingly vulnerable to health threats.

As we struggle to meet our healthcare talent needs, there are large numbers of internationally trained physicians who are driving taxi cabs or working in rapid-attachment jobs because they are unable to obtain physician licenses in the U.S. The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) estimates that there are 165,000 unemployed or underemployed immigrants with international healthcare degrees whose knowledge and experience could be put to use supporting our strained healthcare system.



“We face a growing shortage of medical practitioners and other healthcare professionals in the United States that we can’t afford to ignore. With the right reforms and processes in place, the healthcare field is one area where well-trained immigrant talent can easily be tapped to help fill these workforce gaps. We are proud to be a leader in this effort and will continue to work alongside like-minded organizations and policymakers to advocate for reforms that open doors for the thousands of underemployed international medical graduates in Illinois and across the country.”

— Jina Krause-Vilmar
Upwardly Global President and CEO

Addressing the Gap: Initiatives at the State and Federal Levels

At this moment, we are seeing initiatives at the state and federal levels to embrace skills-based hiring and open opportunities for groups that have been traditionally excluded, including immigrants, refugees, and asylees with international credentials. Healthcare licensing reform has been recognized as a critical area that must be prioritized as reform can drastically unlock opportunity and contribute to improved health outcomes.


Several other states are now examining the underutilization of international medical graduates (IMGs) and developing policies and programs to deploy their talents in shortage areas. Washington state allows IMGs to receive two-year limited licenses to work under the supervision of licensed physicians, Massachusetts and Colorado are working on programs to put IMGs to work in medical areas with insufficient supply, Minnesota is providing state-funded residencies to prepare IMGs for licensure, and Missouri created a new licensed position (Assistant Physician, not to be confused with Physician Assistant) for IMGs to fill. These are just a few of many states that have engaged with this issue.

Building upon this momentum, Illinois launched a temporary permit program in early 2022 designed to provide IMG support to licensed physicians during the COVID-19 pandemic. The program was concluded in May 2023 after awarding over 485 permits to IMGs. Upwardly Global, the first and longest-serving organization dedicated to dismantling employment barriers for immigrant, refugee, and asylee professionals, played a critical role in advocating for this work to catalyze broader healthcare licensing reform in the state of Illinois.

With the right reforms in place, the healthcare field is an area where highly trained refugee and immigrant talent can be tapped to fill workforce gaps, improve the quality and safety of care, and ultimately improve patient outcomes. Illinois joins a lengthy list of states that are pursuing innovative licensing initiatives for IMGs to meet labor shortages. At the federal level, three pieces of legislation were also recently introduced in the House of Representatives to help immigrant professionals enter the healthcare industry; Upwardly Global was proud to endorse these bills.

This paper takes a deeper look at recent legislative strides in Illinois, highlighting the state's strong momentum and political will, as well as recommendations and opportunities for implementation. It urges a strong and united focus on permanent solutions, which need to be codified in legislation with cooperation from regulatory agencies, healthcare systems, and specialized immigrant-facing workforce organizations.

shortage of
3.2
million
healthcare workers
by 2026

An orange icon depicting a clipboard with a heart and an ECG line, symbolizing healthcare and patient care.



Innovation in the Field: Illinois' Approach

Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker recently signed into effect the 2023 Medical Practice Act and a standalone bill creating an Office of the Ombudsman. Included are key provisions that are a win for internationally trained physicians and follow over a year of close collaboration between Upwardly Global, Illinois State Representative Theresa Mah, Ph.D. (D-Chicago), the Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation (IDFPR), the Illinois State Medical Society, and national and local advocacy groups to address the underutilization of IMG talent in the state.

The new reforms mandate the creation of an alternate pathway to full licensure for IMGs (amendment #145 to [SB 1298](#)) and a new ombudsman position within the Illinois regulatory agency ([HB 2948](#)). Collectively, these efforts help put Illinois on the map as a leader in state initiatives to rethink licensing pathways for internationally trained health professionals and for employers looking to diversify their talent pipelines in the face of projected and significant long-term labor shortages. Patients and their families also stand to benefit from the increased language and cultural fluency of their clinical providers.

The alternative pathway to full licensure for IMGs is a notable and important distinction from other state models that create more limited licenses. This reform has the potential to place thousands of IMGs into thriving-wage, skill-aligned work in one of the most heavily regulated and fastest-growing industries in the country. IMGs have already gone through rigorous training processes in their countries of origin, and many bring substantial expertise and years of experience fighting pandemics and other global health threats.

For over two decades, Upwardly Global has been [advocating for policies and practices that champion workforce inclusion](#) for internationally trained healthcare professionals. We have developed particular expertise in supporting IMG professionals, and our programs support both job seekers who want to relicense and those who want to pursue alternative pathways such as

clinical research. To date, we have supported over 850 healthcare job seekers across the U.S.; 730 have secured full-time placements and another 120 have matched for residency positions.

Left Behind: The Current Licensing System Leaves Talent on the Table

Healthcare is one of the fastest-growing sectors in the American economy, a trend that is projected to continue well into the future as our population ages. Like previously mentioned, the American Hospital Association predicts a shortage of over 3.2 million healthcare workers by 2026.

At the same time, there are large numbers of IMGs who are driving cabs or working in other survival jobs that underutilize their skills and passion due to costly and lengthy licensing barriers that prevent them from practicing medicine in the U.S. In Illinois, the reality is no less concerning. With 11,000 underutilized internationally trained health professionals, Illinois is one of the top states (sixth) in the country with this kind of “brain waste,” the nonrecognition of immigrant talent and qualifications.

To relicense and practice medicine in the U.S, IMGs spend years — and often thousands of dollars — getting their credentials certified, taking exams, and completing clinical internships to gain U.S. professional experience. For example, IMGs must pay more than \$2,000 to have their



medical school transcripts certified and to take the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE). From there, IMGs complete a residency training program lasting three to seven years depending on the specialty. The total number of residency spots is limited and capped by federal regulation, with just over 40,000 spots total in 2023. When reviewing applications, program directors often consider where applicants went to medical school, the length of time that has passed since they graduated, and their clinical experience in the U.S. — all factors that put IMGs at a disadvantage.

As a sidebar, IMGs need U.S. clinical observership opportunities for their residency applications. These experiences are often unpaid and can be quite difficult to secure without deep professional networks and enough money to pay the access and placement fees. One leading company states that a standard four-week clinical



31% of active physicians in Illinois are international medical graduates



25.9% of medical residents in Illinois are international medical graduates

experience can cost between \$999 and \$4,199. Additionally, we know that IMGs are likely working survival jobs and may be caring for family members; time poverty makes it harder to focus on these kinds of unpaid opportunities.

Individually and collectively, these barriers keep talented IMGs out of the workforce despite current and projected shortages in physicians and other clinical roles.

Upwardly Global Leverages Experience in Illinois To Help Spark a Conversation

With its world-class healthcare, diverse population, and growing economy, Illinois is a state that is ripe for workforce innovation. Upwardly Global has long had an office in Illinois and has worked with thousands of immigrant, refugee, and asylee professionals in the state. The ecosystem in Illinois is also “IMG friendly”; nearly 31% of active physicians are IMGs (the 4th highest in the U.S.) and over a quarter of residents are IMGs (the 13th highest in the U.S.).

In late 2021, Upwardly Global’s Chicago Leadership Council (a group of local, professional volunteers) and staff partnered with Rep. Theresa Mah, Ph.D., to advocate for alternative pathways to physician licensure. The parties convened a diverse working group of advocates and experts — including the Migration Policy Institute, World Education Services, Chicago Department of Public Health, Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, RefugeeOne, The International Medical Graduates Academy (formerly the Washington Academy for International Medical Graduates), and many more — to examine the underutilization of IMG talent and to develop policies influenced by models in other states. The group then presented a set of recommendations to the regulatory agency, IDFPR, which launched a dialogue that is still underway.

IDFPR’s four-fold mission is to a) protect the residents of Illinois, b) ensure the safety and soundness of financial institutions, c) ensure that competent professionals are licensed to provide services to the public, and d) enhance commerce in the state for the benefit of all its residents. With regards to healthcare, this group oversees regulatory requirements for dozens of professions and industries, including physician licensing. IDFPR is the group that will create the processes, convene a public hearing, and oversee the implementation of the new legislation for IMGs. As noted above, the new IMG-focused ombudsman position will also be housed within IDFPR.

Key Learnings: Illinois Launches and Learns From a Temporary Permit Program

In February 2022, Gov. J.B. Pritzker and IDFPR [issued an emergency proclamation](#) to enable select internationally trained physicians to get temporary permits to help provide relief during the COVID-19 pandemic. Applicants must have already had their credentials certified and passed the three U.S. medical licensing exams to work under the supervision of licensed physicians, drawing upon a similar pandemic initiative in New Jersey. Upwardly Global successfully advocated for the original expiration date to be extended until the end of the emergency declaration, allowing more time for implementation and impact.

With support from Upwardly Global, IDFPR launched the program, released an FAQ memo, created a [promotional video](#), and published an employer-facing fact sheet. Upwardly Global and other working group members assisted with targeted outreach to educate employers about the temporary permits and how they might benefit. In addition, working group members tried to help address questions and implementation challenges to facilitate placements. All of the permits expired on May 11, 2023, which was the end of the COVID-19 emergency declaration in Illinois. Learnings include:



Impact

- As many as **485 permits** were issued between March 2022 and March 2023, with significant outreach to and with community organizations such as the Pakistani-descent Physician Society and Medical Organization for Latino Advancement. Based on a survey Upwardly Global conducted with about 100 respondents, we know that a significant portion of permit holders were not authorized to work in the U.S., lived out of state, or lived outside the country. Creating an ombudsman office should help with future recruitment to specifically target outreach to IMGs based on location and work authorization. A brief survey of IMGs who did not apply would also help to understand the reasons why (e.g., they weren't aware of the permit program, time poverty to complete the application, working other survival jobs, waiting on work authorization, etc.).

- **Seven local employers** made strides to hire permit holders; these were primarily private physician practices that already had IMGs on staff or licensed IMGs who wanted to support others on their pathway to residency and ultimately relicensing in the U.S.
- To our knowledge, **eight IMGs** secured opportunities; three were paid positions or promotions (mostly in medical assistant roles) and five were placed in volunteer positions at a community hospital. The volunteers were primarily in observership roles where they received additional U.S. clinical experience to boost their residency applications. As we will see shortly, the low placement numbers had much to do with the lack of clarity around job functions and malpractice coverage.



485
permits issued



7
employers engaged



8
opportunities secured

Sucesses

- These efforts highlighted the existing **political will for innovations** to address labor market shortages in Illinois, most notably through a strong legislative champion in Rep. Mah and from government agencies like IDFPR, which works to ensure legislation will translate to action.
- **Momentum was built** for more significant and permanent licensing reform, as well as for raising awareness of licensing barriers at the state level.

Challenges and Recommendations

- **Employers expressed hesitancy** to engage in a new, untested program without assurances from regulators or learnings and recommendations from other Illinois-based employers who have implemented this program.
- The program offered **little guidance around implementation** and placement, leaving critical details such as title, scope of work, schedules, compensation, and supervisory models to the discretion and interpretation of employers; notably, the eight individuals that secured positions or volunteer roles may have been able to do so without the temporary permit.
- Several **design elements were nonstarters** for hiring employers: the inability to secure malpractice coverage for permit holders, the inability of IMGs to prescribe medication, and uncertain

Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement (which often paves the way for private insurers' reimbursements as well).

- The main **malpractice insurance carrier** — who covered several of the interested employers — did not recognize the temporary permits, thus halting the placement process with a few potential employers (in some cases, offers to permit holders were actually rescinded).
- There were **unclear permit renewal processes and/or end dates**. With permits tied to a COVID-19 emergency proclamation, the length of the program was uncertain from the start, raising concerns about potentially short-term investments in training and hiring talent.
- Key stakeholders such as IMGs and employers **had limited involvement in the design process**; including them earlier on could have helped to address design elements noted above (malpractice coverage, prescription ability, scope of work, etc.).
- Translating the interest from IMGs into actual job placements proved quite difficult. Given the markedly mixed success, Upwardly Global urges other states to **pursue more permanent alternative licensure models from the start**.

Illinois Pursues More Permanent Reform

Building upon the momentum and lessons learned through the temporary permit program, Illinois pivoted to pursue permanent reform. In mid-2022, Rep. Mah,

“Immigrants have always been an incredible asset to our communities, and House Bill 5465 is a testament to that fact. This legislation will help us address the healthcare workforce shortage, improve the safety of patients, and increase access to employment for internationally licensed healthcare professionals. When we uplift our immigrant communities, everybody wins.”

— Rep. Theresa Mah

along with Illinois Senate co-sponsors Omar Aquino, Patricia Van Pelt, and Mike Simmons, introduced [HB 5465](#) to create the Task Force on Internationally-Licensed Health Care Professionals, which passed with little to no opposition. The bill mandates the creation of a task force in 2023 to investigate barriers to licensure in Illinois and prepare a report with strategies to move forward. As of publication, task force members have not been appointed and the group has yet to convene.

In parallel and prior to the launch of the task force, Upwardly Global, in partnership with working group member organizations and with notable subject matter expertise from our partners at World Education Services, submitted three legislative recommendations for consideration. This paper focuses on two of the three reforms that passed the general assembly in May 2023:

1. Creation of a **permanent alternative pathway to full licensure for IMGs**. The legislation mandates IDFPR to begin awarding limited licenses in January 2025 and provide a pathway to full licensure after a period of supervision to be set by IDFPR, along with other requirements. This is codified in amendment #145 to SB 1298. Upwardly Global and the working group had collectively recommended that the pathway replace the residency requirement. This pathway would consist of two years of limited practice under the supervision of a licensed physician, most likely (though yet to be confirmed) in an area with unmet medical need or with a provider that treats underserved populations.

2. Creation of the **Office of the Ombudsman for International Applicants** within IDFPR via HB 2948 to help IMGs navigate the relicensing process.

Recommendations for Implementation

Going forward, IDFPR will lead the implementation and development of the rules and processes. To meet the January 2025 timeline, time will be of the essence. Upwardly Global anticipates and hopes that IDFPR will solicit input on the draft from both the working group and Rep. Mah's office prior to a formal public hearing in 2024.

For this initiative to be successful, stakeholders must unite under the shared purpose of utilizing IMG talent to strengthen Illinois' healthcare system and navigate barriers to implementation together. Though legislation,

processes, and rule promulgation differ by state, looking to IMG licensing examples in Washington and Colorado will be tremendously helpful. In the former, our partners at The International Medical Graduates Academy played a critical role with implementation and can add credence to the importance of regularly communicating with the medical board, organizing IMGs, reaching out to and educating employers, and proactively addressing concerns around issues like malpractice insurance and billing.

Upwardly Global welcomes conversations about best practices for implementation while navigating the unique ecosystem and landscape in Illinois.

In addition to pursuing the legislative efforts noted above, Upwardly Global strongly urges the parties to:

1. Continue convening the **working group**, with increased ownership by Illinois-based organizations. Upwardly Global will continue to engage, empower, and encourage community groups to contribute while serving in an advisory capacity.
2. Co-create and design reforms with input and buy-in from those who will be asked to implement new policies, notably **employers and IMGs**; the open design questions around malpractice insurance, medical billing and reimbursement, and scope of clinical practice must be addressed.
3. Ensure there is a clear plan for **monitoring and evaluation**, continuous process improvement, and sustainability.

Employer Engagement

Upwardly Global's priority is to help advocate and craft policies that positively impact immigrants, refugees, and asylees, the workforce, and labor markets. To that end, we know that policy changes like the new legislation in Illinois will have a direct impact on employers and hiring practices.

Upwardly Global has been piloting a "returnship" model with NewYork-Presbyterian, one of the largest academic medical centers in the country, to help on-ramp internationally trained immigrant and refugee professionals into jobs in the healthcare sector. The model addresses staffing needs with a new, diverse pool of talent; equips our medical system to have a greater, more equitable impact on health access and outcomes in underserved communities; and offers alternative career pathways for immigrants with international credentials and experience in healthcare, technology, and administration. Candidates benefit from Upwardly Global's individualized and industry-specific career coaching services, and close collaboration between job coaches and recruiters helps to match candidates against hiring needs. The model has proven promising and will be replicated at another major academic medical center in the near future.

Importantly, any "returnship" model should include a specific pathway and program for IMGs with limited licenses, tailored to the rules and processes in each state. In Illinois, it will be important to engage and co-design with employers early on to ensure alignment and

buy-in. The new ombudsman can also play a significant role in educating employers about the new licensing pathway.

Ayo's Story



Ayo is one of the thousands of Illinoisians with an international medical degree; she is ready and eager to become a doctor in the U.S. but hasn't completed the process due to exclusionary practices in the medical field.

Having grown up in a rural community in Nigeria plagued by high infant mortality rates, Ayo always aspired to provide critical care to mothers and families. In pursuit of her dream, Ayo attended medical school in the Caribbean and completed six months of clinical rotations in Chicago, where she met her husband.

Ayo moved to Chicago in 2017 and immediately began the process to become a licensed physician by certifying her foreign credentials and completing two of the three required medical licensing exams. Through [Upwardly Global's free job coaching program](#), she secured a position as a medical assistant, earning \$15 per hour, while simultaneously applying for clinical residency programs – an essential step towards obtaining licensure in the U.S.

Despite sending dozens of residency applications in 2017, Ayo was devastated to receive zero interview invitations. International medical school graduates secure residency slots at [a rate of only 60% compared to 93%](#) for U.S. graduates. Since then, she has applied for slots each year while building her resume through volunteer work.

"If the matching process wasn't this stringent, that would really help," says Ayo, reflecting on the hard work put into those applications year after year.

In 2020, Ayo obtained a unique Missouri license as an [Assistant Physician](#), joining over 20 IMG Assistant Physicians who volunteer their expertise in health clinics across the state. Many even travel from neighboring states to gain the necessary experience for a competitive residency candidacy.

"It's amazing what we do. ... It's a volunteer thing, but there is so much joy," says Ayo. "It



reminds us of what we came to this world to do."

With the added experience, Ayo finally received invitations to interview for residency slots, yet she remains unmatched. Despite being a close contender, an institution cited her "older" graduation year of 2015 as a reason for not securing a position.

"I don't think it is fair – I might be an old grad, but trust me, I know how to run the floor. I've been seeing patients independently for two years," Ayo says. "I don't know why it's so difficult for them to give us a chance. I don't know where the phobia comes from."

Ayo currently volunteers at St. Anthony Hospital in Chicago while working with her Upwardly Global job coach. After the

recent legislative changes in Illinois, she'll be able to apply for a limited license to practice under a supervising physician in 2025, which will give her a pathway to full physician licensure without having to match for residency.

After more than a decade of school, work, and endless volunteering, Ayo may finally earn the recognition her talents and perseverance deserve.

"This is the U.S. — there is always a way," says Ayo. "You must have hope."

How To Help

Though the temporary permit program had limited success, it paved the way for more thoughtful and permanent reform and was ultimately a promising step forward in leveraging the valuable knowledge and skills immigrants bring to our economy and communities. With continued thoughtful and cross-sectoral design and implementation, Illinois can become a model for state and federal reform, opening doors for the tens of thousands of underemployed IMGs across the country.

As the U.S. workforce gains in complexity, so too must our ability to welcome immigrants, respond to refugee crises by providing services and support to newly arrived populations, recognize their unique backgrounds, and help them contribute and become part of the workforce as they build their new lives. There remains much to be done as we continue to provide individualized

career coaching, navigate an increased demand for employment services among community partners, advance our employer partnerships and thought leadership, and take advantage of opportunities to advocate for workforce inclusion at local, regional, and national levels.

Upwardly Global invites you to volunteer with our job seekers, to provide financial support through donations, and to support bipartisan federal legislation that eliminates barriers for internationally trained healthcare professionals. Upwardly Global has been striving to elevate the stories of job seekers with backgrounds in healthcare, such as Remy, Sohaila, Sura, Wyut, and Zahraa and Hussein. For additional reading, please visit the searchable news section of the Upwardly Global website.

For more information, please contact health@upwardlyglobal.org.

