

The Returnship Model:

**A Blueprint for Healthcare Institutions
Hiring Immigrant and Refugee Talent**



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CONTENTS

- 3** Introduction
- 5** Pathways for Immigrants and Refugees Reentering the Healthcare Industry
- 7** Upwardly Global and NewYork-Presbyterian's Returnship Program
- 10** Program Successes, Challenges, and Learnings
- 12** How To Set Up a Returnship Program

Introduction

The United States faces a growing crisis: As critical shortages plague the healthcare industry, a vast pool of international talent sits on the sidelines. Over [260,000 immigrants and refugees with international medical licenses](#) are unemployed or underemployed in the U.S. today, according to the Migration Policy Institute, despite having the potential to fill critical gaps in the healthcare industry.

Too often, immigrants and refugees with medical experience [are sidelined](#) because U.S. licensing rules fail to recognize their education. And healthcare professionals are just the tip of the iceberg — overall, more than [two million work-authorized](#) immigrants, refugees, and asylees with professional experience are unemployed or underemployed in the U.S. today.

By the 2030s, the nation could see shortages of as many as [124,000 physicians](#) and close to [200,000 nurses](#), plus shortfalls in auxiliary professions and healthcare-adjacent roles. Nearly [99 million people](#) in the U.S. live in an area with a shortage of physicians, leaving our health systems ill-prepared to care for our aging population and our communities increasingly vulnerable to health threats, particularly communities of color and immigrant and rural populations.

Strategic solutions are urgently needed to address the crisis, which stems from an aging population, an aging healthcare workforce, and staff burnout.

Returnship programs — essentially mid-career internship programs that help talented individuals reenter the workforce after an extended absence — provide an excellent opportunity for institutions to more easily incorporate internationally trained immigrants into open roles. They are a powerful win-win solution for addressing labor shortages and

improving access to care and quality of care in underserved communities, while also offering an alternative career pathway and paid work experience for immigrants with professional-level expertise.

Upwardly Global — the leading organization dismantling employment barriers for work-authorized immigrants, refugees, and asylees with international credentials and training — launched a returnship program with NewYork-Presbyterian (NYP), one of the most prestigious academic medical centers in the country. It is the first program of its kind for immigrants, refugees, and asylees.

Begun in 2021 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the program helps place immigrants and refugees like [Jacky Petion](#), a physician trained in medicine and infectious diseases in Haiti, into open jobs at the medical center. Forced to flee due to political persecution, Jacky found himself in the United States. He was living in a homeless shelter when Upwardly Global first began to work with him, but now, thanks to the returnship program, he is in a coveted residency program and on track to relicense and practice as a physician in the U.S.



Upwardly Global helped Jacky secure a mid-career internship, or “returnship,” at NewYork-Presbyterian, where he worked as a Registrar at one of the hospital’s COVID-19 vaccination sites. The hospital then hired him into a permanent Research Coordinator role, and by having medical experience in a U.S. clinic and passing his USMLEs (United States Medical Licensing Examinations), Jacky was admitted into a psychiatric residency program at One Brooklyn Health. Soon, Jacky will be able to practice medicine in the U.S., and that’s critically important, not only for him, but for the American healthcare system and economy.

Elyse Zlotnikov, Director of Talent Acquisition at NewYork-Presbyterian, who worked with Jacky to rebuild his career, said, “Jacky is such a wonderful individual and he was so grateful for the opportunities at NYP. We were glad to be a part of his career journey and hope that he will come back to work for us as a physician once he’s licensed.”

Upwardly Global and NewYork-Presbyterian’s returnship program has helped over 100 immigrants and refugees with professional training and experience in diverse fields rebuild their careers in the American healthcare system. Ultimately, the goal is to help employers tap into underutilized talent pools, filling open roles across all aspects of the healthcare business, from patient care to IT to administration to research.

“Upwardly Global is an extraordinary partner. The partnership that we created a few years ago has not only supported us throughout the entire pandemic, but they really fit nicely into our own goals around identifying talent.”

— Shaun E. Smith, Senior Vice President and Chief People and Culture Officer at NewYork-Presbyterian and Upwardly Global Board Member

This report introduces the innovative concept of returnship programs, which offer transformative potential to healthcare institutions and the communities they serve. It provides a roadmap for replication across other medical centers in America, improving access to care and health outcomes while helping internationally trained immigrants contribute their talents to the U.S. and rebuild their lives in dignity.

What is a Returnship?

Returnships were [pioneered by Goldman Sachs in 2008](#) as a means for helping talented professionals restart their careers after an extended absence from the workforce. Most programs focus on helping caregivers reenter the workforce after taking time off to care for children or other family members. They are short-term, paid positions that are designed to help “returners” catch up with new technology, changes in their field, or readjust to professional life.

Returnship programs vary by employer but typically offer hard- and soft-skills training, social support, mentorship, and a pathway to full-time employment. More than 200 companies in the U.S., including Morgan Stanley, General Motors, Audible, and Amazon, offer such programs, often in partnership with nonprofit organizations like [Path Forward](#), [The Mom Project](#), [iRelaunch](#), or [reachHIRE](#).

Returnship programs for caregivers claim high success rates, with anywhere from [60% to 90% of their participants](#) landing full-time jobs after the returnship. For employers, these programs allow for a talented pool of gender-diverse employees to fill mid- and senior-level roles, as many caregivers are women. Employers get a chance to try out employees through these programs, and the returners benefit from the opportunity to restart their careers.

Pathways for Immigrants and Refugees Reentering the Healthcare Industry

Upwardly Global aimed to demonstrate that talent from other diverse communities, such as immigrant, refugee, and asylee professionals, could similarly be tapped through the returnship model.

In the U.S., immigrants, refugees, and asylees face unique barriers that prevent them from accessing professional jobs at their skill level. Barriers often include a lack of professional networks, familiarity with U.S.-specific industry lingo, and recognition of their skills, credentials, and experience by U.S. employers. For international medical graduates (IMGs) and other healthcare professionals in particular, there are very limited options to restart their careers in the U.S. medical field.

Relicensing

In medicine, state testing and licensure for U.S. residency programs can cost thousands of dollars and take years to complete. Internationally trained physicians, for example, must have their medical degrees certified by the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates, pass three U.S. medical licensing exams, and demonstrate U.S. clinical experience, to be certified as eligible for a U.S. residency program.

These prerequisites take an average of [three years](#) to complete and are often unpaid experiences that can be difficult to secure without deep professional networks. Interviewing for residencies is another significant cost that averages about [\\$3,000](#).

They must then complete a time-intensive and costly residency program that takes [three to seven years](#) and pays an average

of [\\$60,000](#). There is no guarantee, however, that an IMG will be accepted into a residency program and, in fact, [only 59% were accepted in 2023](#).

Alternative Pathways

While some immigrants with medical training will choose the more difficult path of relicensing, many others will choose alternative pathways in the healthcare field. For example, an anesthesiologist may work again as an anesthesiology technician.

One such alternative pathway is a returnship program, which hires based on skill and potential rather than a pedigree and acts as an on-ramp to opportunity for internationally credentialed immigrants. Returnship programs offer:

- Critical coaching, networking opportunities, and U.S. work experience that immigrants need to regain a foothold in their field.
- A sustainable wage in a temporary role, removing the financial insecurity that is often a barrier to seeking skill-aligned work.
- An alternative to rapid-attachment survival jobs that waste the job seeker's talent and result in a missed opportunity for the American healthcare system and our economy.

Returnship models for healthcare institutions are a viable solution to the healthcare industry's labor shortages and its need to build a resilient and diverse workforce. Healthcare employers hire talent across a wide spectrum of professions, and immigrants come into the country with a diversity of talent and experience. NewYork-Presbyterian's returnship program, in partnership with Upwardly Global, is the first such program in the country.

Vanessa, a Venezuelan anesthesiologist, fled political persecution with her husband and daughter in 2017. On arrival, she spoke very little English and made ends meet by selling arepas (a Venezuelan pastry) at construction sites where her husband worked.

Occasionally, she helped with construction site cleanup and demolition. Her family lived in a single room while waiting for their asylum case to proceed.

When times felt hard, Vanessa told her husband, “Remember this is not our life. This is not forever. This is for some time. We are going to continue growing in our professions here.”

Vanessa studied English and started researching what it would take to get a job as an anesthesiologist in the U.S. Learning that she’d have to do another residency, which she didn’t feel she had time for — between caring for her daughter, studying English, and adjusting to a new culture — she sought other options to get back to the operating room.

“From the bottom of my heart I wanted to return to the surgery room; it is the area that I feel happy to be there,” she said. “I have many experiences and I was training for many years in that place.”

Vanessa started working with Upwardly Global to prepare for such an alternative role as an anesthesiology technician, such as obtaining a certificate needed to secure employment.

Upwardly Global then helped Vanessa land an interview for a returnship opportunity at NewYork-Presbyterian. During her screening, NewYork-Presbyterian recruiters saw Vanessa’s potential and fast-tracked her application for direct employment into a full-time position of Senior Anesthesia Technician. Without the returnship program putting special attention on talented immigrants and refugees, Vanessa would never have been considered for the role because she would have been viewed as overqualified.

It still took months for NewYork-Presbyterian to work out the kinks of hiring her into the full-time position, but in July 2023, she began her new job as a Senior Anesthesia Technician. She is thrilled to be back in the operating room and is learning many new things.

“I feel that my skills are blooming again,” she said. “I feel very proud to be in NewYork-Presbyterian.”



Upwardly Global and NewYork-Presbyterian's Returnship Program

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when NewYork Presbyterian could not fill countless positions needed to staff its vaccination sites, a hospital board member — who also served on Upwardly Global's Board of Directors — connected the two organizations.

Advocates within NewYork-Presbyterian secured leadership support and investment to design and launch a program together with Upwardly Global. At that time, over 90% of immigrants with healthcare expertise in Upwardly Global's program expressed a strong desire to be on the front lines of the pandemic. Some had experience managing contagious disease outbreaks overseas, but myriad barriers, from licensing requirements to language abilities, prevented a more rapid integration of their experience and talent.

NewYork-Presbyterian's program is a two-track system for tapping into immigrant and refugee talent.

The first track is the returnship, which hires immigrants for three to six months in temporary paid positions, with most returnship participants favoring the six-month duration considering the difficulty they face in quitting survival jobs for short-term roles. The ultimate goal is to on-ramp the job seekers into open roles within the hospital or at other healthcare institutions that match the experience of the applicants. Examples of returnship roles include various occupations, not just medical personnel, such as Registrar, Senior Financial Analyst, Clinical Research Coordinator, and Administrative Assistant.

The second track is a permanent placement program that hires Upwardly Global job seekers directly into full-time jobs. NewYork-Presbyterian continues working with these new hires to ensure that they are in the right roles — roles that will allow them to continue advancing in their career journey. Some job seekers who are referred to the returnship program are placed directly into this second track.

Returnships can act as a stepping stone that enables immigrants, whether they were once a doctor, nurse, medical technologist, accountant, policy analyst, or researcher, to rebuild their careers while filling critical healthcare staffing gaps. While job seekers are often overqualified for these on-ramp positions, they acquire access to large professional networks, the opportunity to advance within an accredited U.S. institution, and internal champions in human resources who look out for them. After being out of their professional field, returners acquire insight into current industry expectations in the U.S. and contribute their distinctive background to the role. They also gain the financial security to work toward longer-term career goals.

The program targets internationally trained immigrants who are reskilling and/or credentialing to meet career goals and who are open to lower-level professional positions as a career step. Many of the participants end up in jobs adjacent to their original careers. Filling such roles allows immigrant professionals to work again in the healthcare field and contribute their extensive knowledge and experience in a new way. Others choose the longer path of completing a U.S. residency to work again as doctors in this country.

"It's a wonderful partnership. Not only is it successful, but we are growing our programs. We continue to evolve the way in which we work together, and we're invested in ensuring that we're bringing people into the organization into the right positions for them."

— Elyse Zlotnikov, Director of Talent Acquisition at NewYork-Presbyterian

Returnship programs vary by employer and can be molded to suit an organization's internal operations and hiring needs. Upwardly Global and NewYork-Presbyterian's program is designed as follows.

Eligibility

To be eligible, a job seeker must be part of Upwardly Global's [Career Coaching Program](#), which requires immigrants, refugees, and asylees to have arrived in the U.S. within the last seven years and to possess at least a bachelor's degree or professional training equivalent, an intermediate level of English, and work authorization. Upwardly Global career coaches work with job seekers to define their career pathway in the U.S. If the returnship program is a good fit, Upwardly Global prepares them for returnships by providing coaching, resume and cover letter support, and interview preparation.

Recruitment

Recruitment is driven by NewYork-Presbyterian, which informs Upwardly Global of open returnship positions in weekly calls. Upwardly Global career coaches review the job descriptions and look for matches with any job seekers they are currently working with. To match with a position, a job seeker must meet the minimum qualifications laid out in the job description and be interested in the position.

If the match looks promising, the career coach helps the job seeker update and tailor their resume before passing their information on to a NewYork-Presbyterian recruiter for further screening.

Skills Matching and Screening

Many of Upwardly Global's job seekers are looking to reenter their industry after working in survival jobs or awaiting work authorization in the U.S. As a result, they are willing to start in entry-level professional roles that give them the ability to rebuild their careers and gain upward

mobility within their industry. Upwardly Global coaches therefore focus on job seekers' skill sets, as well as their work history, to determine whether their skills can be a good match for a returnship.

Once a coach refers job seekers to NewYork-Presbyterian recruiters for further screening, the recruiters guide applicants through the process by providing them with interview-readiness trainings to help them navigate the system.

NewYork-Presbyterian provides Upwardly Global with ongoing feedback on the candidates to ensure that Upwardly Global is sending them the right people.

Coaching and Networking

NewYork-Presbyterian socializes and orients the returners to the organization, providing them an opportunity to adjust to being back in a professional workforce within the hospital. It works with returners throughout the program to help them develop their career paths and their future goals and to place them into permanent positions.

NewYork-Presbyterian's recruiters stay close to the individuals they bring into the returnship program to keep them apprised of opportunities for growth within the organization. Hiring managers will also often act as internal champions for immigrants in the program, alerting them to open job opportunities for which they may be qualified.

Returnship participants continue to stay connected to Upwardly Global throughout their returnship and beyond for continued career coaching. Upwardly Global provides ongoing opportunities for participating in its networking events and encourages individuals to participate in any network-building opportunities offered by NewYork-Presbyterian.

Reskilling and Credentialing

Upwardly Global helps job seekers work toward both short- and long-term goals in parallel, guiding them on the upskilling or credentialing they may need to achieve their goals.

Building Staff Capacity

NewYork-Presbyterian cultivates hiring manager champions and engages recruitment teams to collaborate with Upwardly Global on the program. Engaged recruiters learn how to reduce biases and the barriers they can create for immigrants and refugees. Upwardly Global also offers trainings to help recruiters and hiring managers recognize and remove existing biases they may hold against immigrants and refugees.

“Upwardly Global does such a great job of preparing the job seekers. It doesn’t matter where they’re placed. All the feedback that I receive has been the same from every manager. You will not only gain a dedicated, well-prepared employee, you will also feel good about the work you’re doing.”

— Elyse Zlotnikov, Director of Talent Acquisition at NewYork-Presbyterian

Dwight was born in Jamaica and studied management studies, political science, and government up to the postgraduate level. He migrated to the United Kingdom and worked for many years providing administrative and research support to local government councils in a chief of staff role. Much of his work focused on healthcare policy, regulation, and provision of services.

When Dwight came to the U.S. in 2018, he encountered obstacles to advancing his career. “The jobs that were on offer did not

fully utilize my professional skills or my experience or knowledge,” he said.

Dwight faced one key barrier: lack of U.S. experience. He began working with a coach at Upwardly Global to tailor his resume for the U.S. market, learn how to interview, and secure a certificate in project management.

His healthcare knowledge and experience made him a good fit for Upwardly Global’s returnship program. Dwight secured a position at NewYork-Presbyterian as a Registrar, and when a Grant Writer job opened one year later, the talent acquisition department invited him to apply. Dwight got the job and, as a Grant Writer, helps NewYork-Presbyterian secure funding from state, federal, and local government bodies for health services, such as cancer care and mental health programs, within New York.

“I love it because it allows me to fully apply myself in terms of professional skills and experience and because it allows me to make a contribution to the United States,” he said.

“Upwardly Global saw the potential in me at the beginning, and here I am two years on from the internship in a permanent role, making a meaningful contribution because the things I do impact so many individuals.”



Program Successes, Challenges, and Learnings

Successes

The returnship program provides immigrants and refugees with work experience, career coaching, and professional networks in a U.S. context. This deep understanding of the U.S. workforce and professional culture provides them with the framework they need to land jobs in their professions.

Thus far, NewYork-Presbyterian has hired more than 60 immigrants and refugees in returnship and full-time roles through the program. One-third of returners have been hired into full-time roles at the institution. Examples of the jobs immigrants have landed through the program include:

Administrative Business Assistant

Registered Nurse **Senior Anesthesia Technician**

Services Manager **Talent Acquisition Sourcing Specialist**

Laboratory Prep Tech

Community Affairs Analyst **Clinical Research Coordinator**

Supervisor of Support Services **IT System Support Program Coordinator**

Research Fellow

Senior Financial Analyst

NewYork-Presbyterian serves many immigrant communities in New York City and has a longstanding commitment to equity and health justice, which includes hiring people that live around its hospitals. Its partnership with Upwardly Global has helped improve the institution’s efforts to recruit from some of these communities.

“We’re finding individuals who have extraordinary skills that we would not have found without the partnership with Upwardly Global,” said Shaun E. Smith. “Prior to Upwardly Global, we had done broad outreach to [immigrant] communities, but it had not been as smooth.”

The partnership has also helped NewYork-Presbyterian find the right people who want to be part of the future of the organization and who can manage change and adjust in the agile way healthcare needs to pivot today. Internationally trained immigrants and refugees often speak multiple languages and have a cultural humility that comes from working in different countries, as well as facility with change, having lived through sometimes extraordinary circumstances in their countries of origin.

As Smith noted, “Turnover within the healthcare sector is pretty dramatic. People are leaving our industry in droves and it’s great to attract people who really want to be here, who really want to focus and to leverage their skills, their experience in a way that’s going to support our patients.”

“I only see bringing on more and more job seekers from Upwardly Global. We are in a really unique situation in New York City where we have more immigrants and refugees and asylum seekers than we have seen in years, between the Afghan refugees, the Ukrainian refugees, and the migrants who have been coming.”

— Elyse Zlotnikov, Director of Talent Acquisition at NewYork-Presbyterian

Challenges

It takes time to educate and get all the necessary stakeholders, including recruiters, hiring managers, and senior staff, on board within an institution. Many institutions work with external staffing agencies, which also need to be educated and integrated into the effort.

The long-standing bias against hiring an overqualified person into a lower-level position is a significant barrier to overcome. Human resources staff need to be educated about internationally trained immigrants to understand the vast skills and experience they offer as well as why they would be willing to take lower-level jobs as a stepping stone. These roles allow them to more quickly attain professional jobs and progress in their career journey, providing financial security and setting the foundation for long-term success. They also offer opportunities for skill-building, networking, and understanding cultural nuances in the U.S. workplace. Job seekers often simultaneously explore internal mobility options aligning with their skill set.

Human resource departments at healthcare institutions are constantly evolving to adapt to changing conditions in the economy, in society, and in medicine. It can be challenging to design a standard operating practice for a returnship program with the ability to transcend the constant changes. Upwardly Global strives to develop such a standard operating practice in partnership with healthcare institutions.

Learnings

Returnships are stepping stones or an on-ramp for talented individuals. They unlock opportunities that lead to career growth for highly capable immigrants and refugees who often have more to offer beyond what's required for these entry-level jobs.

Getting a program off the ground requires a big, collaborative education effort within institutions about internationally trained immigrants and the value they can

bring to organizations to help fill hiring gaps. To kickstart this work, it is vital to secure buy-in from leadership. Identifying and engaging key decision-makers who are willing to commit to and champion this work is essential.

Cultivating hiring managers and recruiters as internal champions is key for both launching a program and its ongoing success. A critical mass of internal champions is essential for piloting different iterations of the program. It is also essential for keeping the program running smoothly and with the ability to overcome the inevitable roadblocks that will arise.

High-volume, entry-level jobs needed across many departments, such as Registrar or Patient Care Representative, make for the best returnship slots. Having consistent returnship opportunities makes it easier for partner organizations serving immigrant communities to match job seekers with open roles because there is not a constant reinventing of the wheel to evaluate the skills required in a new job and to seek out best matches.

Ongoing collaborative education is important to ensure that the program remains an integral part of the human resources team and to reduce the barriers that immigrants and refugees face in the workforce.

Institutions may want to approach returnship programs as a means for providing them with a pool of onboarded, capable employees who can quickly fill open roles during surge times.



How To Set Up a Returnship Program

NewYork-Presbyterian's returnship program with Upwardly Global is a replicable solution to what many call a national emergency that will only get worse. Credentialed immigrants and refugees offer a diverse new pool of untapped talent to fill healthcare staffing needs. Returnships give these individuals the foot in the door that they need to rebuild their careers in the American medical system. But it requires time, a financial commitment, and the buy-in from top leadership to make these programs work and to reap the rewards they offer. Partnering with external organizations that serve the internationally trained immigrant and refugee community is also key.

Employers who want to replicate NewYork-Presbyterian's returnship model can get started with the following steps:

- 1. Secure leadership's commitment and investment in the program.**
- 2. Identify opportunities or existing programs within your organization that you can build on. For example, consider expanding current internship or returnship programs for other populations to include mid-career immigrants and refugees.**
- 3. Identify professional lower-level roles that are hired at volume in your institutions, such as Laboratory Technician or Registrar. These are the kinds of positions that talented immigrants and refugees can fill while they work toward their longer-term career goals.**
- 4. Develop internal champions in the human resources team. Find the recruiters, hiring managers, and other staff most committed to the effort who will bring in great talent and inspire others. Harness that energy.**
- 5. Identify and work with immigrant-serving organizations in your community to create pathways to entry-level roles and map higher-level candidates to other opportunities. The International Medical Graduates**

Academy, for example, mentors internationally trained doctors who want to pursue a U.S. residency program and work in this country as a doctor.

- 6. Develop internal mobility tracks for highly skilled individuals in entry-level roles. Ensure that human resources staff continue working with the immigrants to help them define a career trajectory within the company. This helps institutions meet both immediate and future needs.**

7. Partner with Upwardly Global.

For more information, and to learn about partnership opportunities with Upwardly Global, [visit our website](#).

Upwardly Global is the premier national organization working to support immigrants and refugees with international credentials to restart their careers in the United States. Since 2000, we have supported over 10,000 newcomers in their transition from underemployment into quality jobs with an average starting salary of \$65,000.

When done right, inclusion of internationally trained immigrants into healthcare institutions unlocks a double win. It offers newcomers a path to supporting themselves, their families, and their communities with dignity. In tandem, it addresses critical hospital staffing shortages, improves delivery of services, particularly in underserved communities, and adds billions of dollars in value to our economy.

Returnship programs are a highly effective solution for not only getting things right but for transforming our healthcare institutions and the communities they serve with a new pool of diverse talent, eager to contribute their skills and experiences to the country they now call home. The end result is shared prosperity for us all.

Andrei, a Belarusian immigrant with a master's degree and project management experience, faced numerous challenges upon arriving in the U.S. in 2015. Despite his qualifications, he struggled to secure a job due to a lack of U.S. work experience.

"Even with education, people are still skeptical," he says. Initially, he took on physically demanding roles in restaurant kitchens and as a receptionist at a hair salon, which lacked the professional fulfillment and stability he desired.

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, Andrei found himself unemployed as the hair salon closed its doors. Contemplating a career shift, he turned to Upwardly Global, which provided professional training and personalized career guidance.

Inspired by the challenges of the pandemic, Andrei decided to pivot towards a career in healthcare. With the support of his job coach, he participated in the returnship program with NewYork-Presbyterian. In August 2021, he secured an internship at a COVID-19 vaccination

and testing site as a Registrar. His performance led to multiple contract extensions, providing him with valuable experience and professional connections.

"I've met so many great people — employees from NYP and also other Upwardly Global alumni," he said. Andrei's manager became a professional mentor, and engagement with colleagues built a supportive professional network.

After completing his internship in May of 2022, Andrei was offered a full-time position as a Program Coordinator at NewYork-Presbyterian's COVID-19 department. One year later, he earned a promotion to a Project Leader role within the same department.

His leadership and hard work stood out to his colleagues, leading to his election as the Chair for the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) subcommittee within the Emerging Leadership Council at NewYork-Presbyterian in July 2023.

"As an immigrant and member of the LGBTQ+ community, I am proud to be a champion of DEI in the workplace," Andrei says.





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upwardlyglobal.org