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Foreign nurses face a green-card nightmare

Recruiters still go after them despite the wait

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GREATER METROPLEX — Imagine supermodel Naomi Campbell caring for a heart attack victim. How about Claudia Schiffer assisting in the delivery room?

"Foreign nurses can get in this country in two years, but fashion models can get in as little as two months," said Carl Shusterman, a well-known California immigration attorney. "I guess the next time you have a medical emergency, you will have to call on a fashion model."

Fashion models,



SHUSTERMAN:
Easier for models

because of their "distinguished merit and ability," qualify for H-1B nonimmigrant temporary visas more typically designated for doctors, engineers and pharmacists. However, there's no provision for nurses.

Currently, the only viable method for nurses to enter the United States to work is through the immigrant visa process, which means applying for a green card. That allows a foreign nurse to work in the country indefinitely.

"Due to processing times and backlogs at the Immigration and Naturalization Service, it can take eight to 11 months to obtain an immigrant visa to enter the United States," said Charla Truett, an immigration attorney in Dallas.

Or longer. As Craig Sims, CEO and president at RHD Memorial Medical Center, knows well.

RHD and Trinity Medical Center in

Carrollton hired several nurses from India but, nine months later, the nurses have yet to receive green cards. The hospitals have been told the wait could extend another nine months.

"The low unemployment rate nationally, including health care, has organizations looking at all options," Sims said. "While we are recruiting foreign nurses, this is only a small focus of our overall recruitment plan and efforts. More effort is being placed on retention of our current nursing staff, and we are also working to influence future workers through a high school mentoring program."

The hospitals are well-advised to seek other options, said Shusterman, who has helped more than 5,000 nurses maneuver through the visa process. India's green-card backlog stretches to February 1997 with no indications of improving.

Many hospitals have opted to recruit in Canada, where nurses can obtain an interim permit to practice in just a few months. But Canada, like many other countries, is experiencing a nursing shortage and is aggressively recruiting.

Ironically, the exclusion of nurses in the H-1B provision is the result of the Immigrant Nursing Relief Act of 1989, which established a separate visa status for nurses during the last worker shortage. The Relief Act's five-year program expired in September 1995.

"It would take a simple sentence to include nurses, but no one in Congress seems to want to take that step, and the American Hospital Association isn't lobbying for it," Shusterman said. However, there are several other bills before Congress to increase the number of other foreign professionals.

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