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Testimony on H-5108, Internationally Trained Physicians House Corporations Committee February 25, 2025

Good afternoon, Chairperson Soloman and members of the House Corporations Committee. My name is Jocelyn Antonio, and I serve as the Director of Program Implementation and Policy at the Hassenfeld Child Health Innovation Institute at the Brown University School of Public Health. I am providing this testimony in my personal capacity.

I strongly urge your support for **H-5108 – An Act Relating to Businesses and Professions – Board of Medical Licensure and Discipline**, sponsored by Representative Solomon and co-sponsored by Representatives Casimiro, Cruz, McNamara, J. Lombardi, Ackerman, Cortvriend, Biah, McGaw, and Marszalkowski.

This legislation creates pathways to licensing internationally trained physicians so they may practice in rural and underserved communities in Rhode Island and eventually obtain a full, unrestricted license to practice medicine. From a public health perspective, this legislation addresses critical healthcare challenges and offers a strategic solution to improve healthcare access and quality for all Rhode Islanders.

Addressing Physician Shortages in Underserved Areas

Rhode Island is facing a physician shortage, particularly in primary care. A recent study from Brown University's Warren Alpert Medical School reported that there are approximately 700 primary care providers for the entire state – equating to one primary care provider for every 1,700 people. Even if every active physician saw 1,200 patients annually, an additional 300 physicians would still be needed to meet the state's healthcare demands.¹ This shortage is even more severe in pediatrics and pediatric subspecialties, posing a direct threat to children's health.^{2,3}

This physician shortage constitutes a major public health crisis. It compromises the quality of care, limits access to vaccines and screenings for preventable disease, and leads to overcrowding in emergency rooms, which subsequently drives up healthcare costs.^{4,5}

Leveraging a Skilled and Diverse Workforce

Currently, over 230,000 licensed internationally trained medical graduate doctors are practicing in the United States, making up about 23% of the physician workforce.⁶ However, only about one in three immigrant physicians in the U.S. end up practicing medicine.⁷ This is not due to a lack of educational credentials-approximately 80% hold M.D. degree – but rather because the physician licensure process is complex, requiring exams, field-specific medical residencies, and substantial financial resources.⁷

House Bill 5108 proposes a mentorship-based pathway to licensure, enabling internationally trained physicians to integrate into our healthcare system more efficiently. This approach not only alleviates workforce shortages but also enriches the medical community with diverse perspectives and cultural competencies, ultimately enhancing patient care. Additionally, data suggests that over 50% of immigrant physicians are already working in the healthcare-related roles that do not fully utilize their medical training.⁷ By recognizing their experience and providing a pathway to licensure, we can harness their skills to benefit Rhode Island's communities.

Improving Health Outcomes through Culture Competence

Research has shown that a diverse and representative health care workforce improves patients' access to care, their perceptions of the care they receive, and their health outcomes, particularly for patients of color. Studies indicate that Black patients who are treated by Black doctors are more satisfied with their health care, more likely to receive the preventive care, and more likely to follow through with recommended treatments such as vaccinations and screenings. Similar patterns hold for other racial and ethnic groups.⁸

When healthcare providers share cultural and linguistic backgrounds with their patients, they build relationships based on respect, empathy, and trust. Internationally trained physicians often bring multilingual abilities and cultural insights that can bridge communication gaps, foster trust, and improve patient adherence to medical advice. By passing H-5108, Rhode Island can enhance the cultural competence of its healthcare providers, leading to better health outcomes and greater patient satisfaction.

Economic and Community Benefits

Facilitating the integration of internationally trained physicians into our healthcare system can also drive economic growth by creating jobs and reducing healthcare costs associated with delayed treatments and emergency care.^{9,10} Additionally, improving access to quality healthcare makes communities more attractive places to live and work, contributing to overall societal well-being.

Conclusion

I grew up in a predominately immigrant community, and many of those close to me share this background. Amongst them are former physicians who have lived in this country for decades but have been unable to practice medicine due to burdensome licensing process. Many have had to work in factories or as cleaners, despite their extensive medical training and experience. While these jobs are honorable and necessary, it is a profound loss – for both these individuals and our communities – that their expertise remains untapped.

House Bill 5108 is more than just a policy fix for Rhode Island's physician shortage – it is a chance to reaffirm our commitment to equity, inclusion, and the recognition of talent regardless of where it was cultivated. By supporting this bill, we acknowledge the immense potential of

internationally trained physicians and take a meaningful step toward a healthier, more equitable Rhode Island.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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