

October 26, 2020

Sharon Hageman  
Acting Regulatory Unit Chief  
Office of Policy and Planning  
U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement  
Department of Homeland Security  
500 12<sup>th</sup> Street SW  
Washington, DC 20536

*Submitted via regulations.gov*

RE: [ICEB-2019-0006] Establishing a Fixed Time Period of Admission and an Extension of Stay Procedure for Nonimmigrant Academic Students, Exchange Visitors, and Representatives of Foreign Information Media

Dear Ms. Hageman,

The American College of Rheumatology (ACR), representing over 7,700 rheumatologists and rheumatology interprofessional team members, appreciates the opportunity to respond to the fixed period of admission and extension of stay proposed rule as published in the *Federal Register* on September 25, 2020. We welcome the opportunity to share our strong concerns regarding the proposed policy of eliminating the duration of stay for academic visas, including J visas. Our nation is facing a pandemic with an inadequate physician workforce. J-1 physicians provide critically needed care for patients during this time of uncertainty. Thus, this proposed policy will create unnecessary burdens and will significantly hinder access to quality care for patients. Therefore, **the ACR strongly opposes the proposed policy to eliminate the stay provision duration and replace it with a specific end date and urges the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency to rescind this proposal.**

Rheumatologists, rheumatology healthcare professionals, and fellows-in-training provide ongoing care for approximately 54 million adults and 300,000 children suffering from complex chronic and acute conditions, including rheumatoid arthritis, systemic lupus, and other forms of systemic inflammatory disease.<sup>1 2</sup> Our specialty faces a significant shortage in the workforce. The United States healthcare system continues to experience a debilitating workforce shortage. The American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC) projects a physician shortage of approximately 54,100 to

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention National Statistics. (2018, February 07). Retrieved October 17, 2020, from [https://www.cdc.gov/arthritis/data\\_statistics/national-statistics.html](https://www.cdc.gov/arthritis/data_statistics/national-statistics.html)

<sup>2</sup> Prevalence of Rheumatic Disease. (2017, September 18). Retrieved October 16, 2020, from <http://simpletasks.org/prevalence-of-rheumatic-disease/>

139,000 physicians by 2033, with the most significant impact in the primary care specialties.<sup>3</sup> Physician shortages of this magnitude severely limit a patient's access to care, which results in a sicker population. Fortunately, the nearly 12,000 physicians under the J-1 visa status provide quality care during their training which allows for greater access to our patients and helps mitigate the significant workforce shortage facing our healthcare system.

The proposed policy aims to reduce the number of overstay rates by eliminating the duration of stay provision of the visa and replacing it with a specific end date. While we recognize the need for foreign medical graduates to comply with all federal requirements related to their visas, this policy is unnecessary and places significant burdens on the physician, the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG), and teaching hospitals. ECFMG closely monitors all foreign medical graduates to ensure they comply with their visas. J-1 physicians are required to apply for an extension of their visa and undergo a rigorous review of their training to ensure compliance with all federal regulations. Additionally, all J-1 physician information, including training information and duration of stay dates, are tracked in the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS).

With the rigorous monitoring and tracking system in place for J-1 physicians, the proposed policy to set specific end dates is unnecessary. Instead of accomplishing the goal of reducing the overstay rates, this proposal will force these physicians and their training hospitals to apply for an extension directly with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services that will result in an extended wait time of five to nineteen months. This wait time will jeopardize the ability of physicians to successfully complete their training. Alternatively, physicians will be required to reapply for an extension through a U.S. consulate abroad. Again, this unnecessary and burdensome step will 1) hinder the training of the physician, and 2) will significantly hinder patients' access to quality care.

Our nation is grappling with a pandemic that has crippled the healthcare system. J-1 physicians provide critically needed care for patients during this time of uncertainty. Creating these policies that make it more difficult for J-1 physicians to train and practice is detrimental to the health of our nation's citizens. Please contact Amanda Grimm Wiegrefe, MScHSRA, Director of Regulatory Affairs, at [awiegrefe@rheumatology.org](mailto:awiegrefe@rheumatology.org) should you have any questions or need clarification.

Sincerely,



Ellen M. Gravalles, MD  
President, American College of Rheumatology

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<sup>3</sup> American Association of Medical Colleges. (2020, June). *The Complexities of Physician Supply and Demand: Projections from 2018-2033*. <https://www.aamc.org/system/files/2020-06/stratcomm-aamc-physician-workforce-projections-june-2020.pdf>