



How States Can Address the Nursing Shortage: Advancing Opportunities for Internationally Trained Nurses

The United States will need more than 200,000 new registered nurses each year through 2026 to fill the gap of retiring nursing professionals, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. This shortage presents a daunting challenge to medical institutions and health care providers, particularly in rural and other underserved areas.

Internationally trained nurses could help meet workforce needs and provide culturally competent health care if states reduced the barriers that impede these nurses from accessing licensure.

Internationally trained nurses who seek to practice in the U.S. confront significant obstacles, chiefly confusing and inconsistent standards and regulations that vary widely by state. Licensure procedures are time-consuming, costly, and difficult to navigate—and nurses moving from one state to another sometimes find themselves forced to restart the process.

Policymakers can open pathways for internationally trained nurses to rejoin their careers by standardizing and streamlining four key areas: English language proficiency assessment, credential evaluation, licensure by endorsement, and alternative pathways to licensure.

English Language Proficiency Assessment

All U.S. states require that nursing candidates demonstrate some level of English language proficiency in order to be licensed, and many states use assessments for this purpose.

The two assessments that are used most, the internet-based Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL-iBT) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) Academic test, are used primarily in academic settings and do not necessarily test the English skills necessary for health care providers.

Furthermore, the proficiency standards that nursing candidates must meet vary from state to state. Even when states use the same assessment, they may require different minimum passing scores. This inconsistency means that a nurse who is fully licensed in one state may need to devote significant time and expense to meet the language proficiency requirements of a different state.



States can facilitate international candidates' path to licensure by (1) waiving language testing requirements for all candidates who have graduated from training programs taught in English, (2) accepting a wider range of English proficiency tests, and (3) using a “superscore” policy, which considers a candidate's best score on each module from several test sittings.

Credential Evaluation

In assessing the qualifications of internationally trained nurses, states typically rely on the services of independent credential evaluation providers. The cost of these services can be considerable, and application processing times sometimes take longer than advertised. Furthermore, about a dozen states use these services to verify English language proficiency, adding a further financial burden to the aspiring licensee.

States should accept reports from a broad range of reliable credential evaluation providers in order to afford candidates more choice while maintaining appropriate standards.

Licensure by Endorsement

After successful licensure and a set period of practice in another U.S. state, nurses are often eligible for state licensure by endorsement. This policy offers nurses increased career flexibility and allows states to attract qualified nurses from across the country.

Although the state licensure by endorsement process is relatively uniform—especially for nurses trained in the U.S.—many states have adopted more restrictive policies for nurses licensed in another state who completed their nursing education in another country. These policies may require internationally educated applicants to take an English language assessment exam even if they have already completed testing in another state, or to submit transcripts of their nursing education that have already been submitted and approved in their original state of licensure.

States should establish consistent requirements for nurses who hold licensure in other states, regardless of their country of education.

Alternative Pathways to Licensure

Some states are examining ways to establish alternative pathways to licensure for internationally trained nurses. One promising example is Georgia, which passed legislation granting boards of nursing the discretion to review and approve nursing programs in another country as equivalent to a U.S. nursing education. Policies like this preserve board oversight while increasing flexibility in addressing local health workforce needs.