

## Federal Policy Changes Impact Foreign Healthcare Workers

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There has been a major change in the Federal Policy (from the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS)) that affects the hiring of foreign healthcare workers in the United States. The new policy called the Homeland Security Rules, passed in 2003, mandates that all laboratories must meet the regulation by July 25, 2004.

The final regulation requires Medical Technologists and Medical Laboratory Technicians, (as well as Nurses, Physical Therapists, Occupational Therapists, Physician Assistants, Audiologists, and Speech-Language Pathologists) who are not U.S. citizens, to obtain a special certificate to provide healthcare services in this country. The new rules are intended to ensure that foreign healthcare workers meet professional training and standards necessary to provide diagnostic services and patient care in U.S. hospitals and clinical facilities. The final rules approved by the DHS apply to foreign healthcare workers seeking either temporary or permanent occupational visas (Green Cards). Previously, the rules applied only to foreign healthcare professionals seeking permanent occupational visas. The new rules also will apply to healthcare professionals from Mexico and Canada who were exempt under the terms of the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

The Commission on Graduates of Foreign Nursing Schools (CGFNS) was designated by the U.S. Congress in 1996 to manage a healthcare worker visa certification program. CGFNS established the International Commission on Healthcare Professions (ICHP), to manage the application process for this program. ICHP calls its application program “*VisaScreen*”.

The “*VisaScreen*” program reviews a foreign healthcare worker's education to ensure it is equivalent to that available in the U.S., evaluates all current and previous licenses to practice received by the foreign healthcare worker, and assesses English language proficiency.

The new rules require that a “*VisaScreen*” certificate be presented whenever a foreign healthcare professional enters the U.S. to work, applies for an extension of stay, or when there is a change in immigration status or employment. Although the new rules went into effect on September 23, 2003, they include a transition period for foreign healthcare workers to minimize disruption in the current U.S. healthcare employment market. Temporary workers, including those previously covered under the NAFTA agreement, will be admitted to the US with or without a “*VisaScreen*” certificate until July 25, 2004, but for a period of not more than one year.

Information pertaining to the new regulation can be found at [www.ascp.org](http://www.ascp.org) on the left side of the page. Detailed information and applications can also be found on the International Commission on Healthcare Professions website, [www.cgfns.org](http://www.cgfns.org).