

**Testimony by Steven Francy
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**Before the House Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Immigration,
Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law**

Legislative Hearing on the Need for Highly Skilled Immigrant Workers

June 12, 2008

My name is Steven Francy and I am the Executive Director of RNs Working Together, AFL-CIO. I want to thank you for the opportunity to present our views on the issue of whether the expansion of work visas to foreign nurses is an appropriate solution to the nursing shortage that our nation faces.

First a little about the organization RNs Working Together (RNWT). We are a coalition of ten AFL-CIO unions who represent over 200,000 working registered nurses. Each affiliate union has 2 of its nurse leaders who serve on the RNs Working Together Leadership Committee. One of their responsibilities is to set policy for our organization. We are a democratic organization and operate by building mutual agreement among our members regarding issues that concern working registered nurses.

First of all, the continuing shortage of Registered Nurses is a problem that virtually everyone acknowledges. If you were to walk the halls of America's hospitals and asked a nurse what is the number one problem that they face, they would probably say, "we do not have enough staff to deliver quality care." While we appreciate everyone's efforts in

trying to address this crisis, we do not believe that relying upon thousands of additional foreign nurses to deliver health care in the United States is an appropriate solution to the nursing shortage.

There are many factors that contribute the current nursing shortage. Two of the major factors that I would like to draw your attention to today is our inability to train enough Americans to become registered nurses and the difficult working conditions that working nurses face. To resolve these, and other factors that contribute to the nursing shortage, will require a focused, comprehensive strategy.

First, we do not have the capacity to train enough nurses. Last year alone, approximately one hundred and fifty thousand (150,000) qualified applicants for nursing schools were turned away because there were not enough seats available. Our inability to train these applicants is due to a shortage of RN faculty who are often paid less than practicing nurses. Congress needs to pass legislation that will increase the capacity of nursing schools to train nurses. This would include incentives to attract nurse faculty as well as to actively recruit and provide financial assistance to those Americans who would like to become nurses.

In addition, it is estimated that there are 2.9 million licensed RNs in the U.S., but only 2.4 million are providing care to patients. Hundreds of thousands of licensed nurses have left the bed-side in favor of the many other job options now available from outpatient jobs, computer jobs, quality management, doctor's offices, pharmaceutical jobs or leaving

nursing entirely. A key reason for this migration away from the bedside is that chronic understaffing and unmanageable workloads are a day-to-day reality. While increasing the number of visas may seem like an easy solution, in reality it does nothing to retain nurses that are already trained, skilled professionals. Stopping this leakage of nurses will require Congress to direct their attention to this issue and pass legislation that will directly improve working conditions. Examples include prohibiting mandatory overtime and requiring hospitals to meet safe minimum staffing levels. We are confident that by taking these steps, those nurses who have left the profession and those that are now thinking about leaving the profession will come back and care for America's sick.

As you know, America is not the only country facing a nurse shortage. Indeed there is a worldwide shortage of registered nurses. Thus the use of immigration policies that allegedly benefit one country in the short-run can be devastating to a developing country's ability to deliver health care to their citizens. Some countries have an even greater shortage of nurses and any loss of the nurses they have trained can undermine their government's efforts to staff their own hospitals and clinics. In one year alone, Ghana lost more than 500 nurses – more than double the number of its new nurse graduates. In the Philippines, not only are they losing more nurses than graduate from nursing schools, now even doctors are training to become nurses in the hopes that they will find employment in the U.S. In Zimbabwe, it has been estimated that the nurse to patient ratio is 1 nurse to 700 patients. Obviously, nurses in developing countries will find coming to America for a job very attractive, as they will experience a great increase in their incomes. But expanding nurse visas simply out sources nurse training to

developing countries and robs them of many of the nurses they have trained. In sum, taking nurses from poor countries will have a small short-run impact on the U. S. while increasing the short and long-term misery of poor, developing countries.

Again, I understand that increasing the number of work visas seems like an easy solution.

However, we believe that developing a comprehensive long-term strategy that directly addresses the factors contributing to the nurse shortage in our country, such as increasing our capacity to educate new nurses and improving working conditions, is a more productive use of time and resources and is the only real way in which America can solve this long-term issue.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding this important and difficult issue. I can answer any question you can have.

RNs Working Together is a coalition of the following 10 AFL-CIO unions representing over 200,000 registered nurses. We are America's largest organization of working registered nurses.

American Federation of Government Employees
American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees
American Federation of Teachers (AFT-Health Care)
California Nurses Association/National Nurse Organizing Committee
Communications Workers of America
JNESO/International Union of Operating Engineers
Office and Professional Employees International Union
United American Nurses
International Union, United Autoworkers
United Steelworkers