

Bill Introduction: H.606

Senate Committee on Government Operations

March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2024

Good afternoon, Committee. For the record, my name is Representative Esme Cole of Hartford. Thank you for your consideration of H.606—a bill which would reduce barriers to professional licensure in Vermont. This bill aims to address Vermont's shrinking workforce and to maximize our state's economic potential by employing professionals in the occupations that best align with their skills and training, regardless of immigration status.

H.606 would not in any way alter skills-based requirements for licensure. The main provision in this bill is that an applicant may choose to provide a federal employer identification number, an individual taxpayer identification number (ITIN), or a social security number on each occasion required by state law. All three of these forms of tax identification allow employees to contribute their skills to the workforce and pay income-based taxes.

The timing of this bill aligns favorably with a change at the federal level. On January 19<sup>th</sup> of this year, the IRS began using a modernized, electronic application process for ITINs. Prior to this implementation, applicants had to submit critical documentation by postal mail and ran the risk of being without it for weeks. This new system will expedite the process and make this form of tax identification more tenable for many. The update could generate a new pool of eligible participants in our workforce, so long as we accommodate our state-issued application materials accordingly.

Vermont has already enjoyed the benefits of a trial implementation of this policy. In the face of a drastic nursing shortage, the Office of Professional Regulation took the initiative to expand access to the nursing profession regardless of immigration status. This policy choice may have very well saved lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. H.606 would expand similar benefits to other jobs in healthcare and beyond in dire need of qualified staff—from radiologic technicians, to social workers, foresters, substance misuse counselors, CDL drivers, barbers, et cetera.

I likely do not have to tell you that Vermont is facing an oncoming workforce crisis. No other state has a smaller share of its population in their prime working years<sup>1</sup>, and in November 2023, 19,000 jobs lay vacant in Vermont, yet in the same month, only 7,544 Vermonters were

unemployed.<sup>2</sup> Even if every unemployed Vermonter's skills, interests, and location perfectly aligned with the requirements of the open jobs, Vermont would still have over 11,000 unfilled positions. Unfortunately, such a perfect match-up rarely exists, and many individuals lack the skills, background, or licenses required to fill open positions, and the problem may only worsen. In nursing alone, Vermont will need 9,000 new nurses over the next five years to meet current trends in demand.<sup>3</sup> These vacancies have severe implications on our economy, tax base, quality of care, and burnout.

Across *all* Vermont industries, persistent vacancies continue to undermine the efficiency and productivity of the local economy and create supply chain delays that can impact consumer experiences and business continuity nationwide. To combat this, JFO states that "there are actions that could be taken to accept, welcome and help transition foreign-born families and workers that may be affordable - and could make a difference."<sup>4</sup>

Ten states have implemented some form of this policy already, and I hope that Vermont will follow suit.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to continuing the conversation.

1. Ben Casselman and Jeanna Smialek, "Vermont May Be the Face of a Long-Term U.S. Labor Shortage," *New York Times*, November 12, 2023.
2. "Unemployment Insurance Program Data Dashboard," State of Vermont, Department of Labor, November 2023.
3. Jack Thurston, "Vermont leaders call for focus on 'crisis' of nursing staffing levels," NBC, WPTZ Burlington, January 3, 2022.
4. Kavet, Rockler & Associates, LLC. *January 2024 Economic Review and Revenue Forecast*, Economic and Public Policy Consulting, 18 Jan. 2024, [ljfo.vermont.gov/assets/Subjects/Consensus-Revenue-Forecasts-Legislative-Economic-Outlook/af1507f79a/Commentary-0124-final.pdf](https://jfo.vermont.gov/assets/Subjects/Consensus-Revenue-Forecasts-Legislative-Economic-Outlook/af1507f79a/Commentary-0124-final.pdf)