

November 16, 2022

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Leader McCarthy, Leader Schumer, and Leader McConnell:

As you continue to work toward passing appropriations for Fiscal Year 2023, the undersigned national organizations, representing many different denominations and faith traditions, write to urge you to include in your next appropriations measure a permanent extension of the non-minister special immigrant portion of the Religious Worker Visa Program (RWVP).¹ American communities depend on non-minister special immigrants, who provide many essential services, not only to members of their own denominations but to the general public. Congress should provide certainty and stability for this program.

The non-minister special immigrant portion of the RWVP became law in 1990.² Originally enacted with a sunset provision, it has enjoyed broad, bipartisan support in Congress and has been reauthorized more than a dozen times since then. Under this small but important program, a maximum of 5,000 visas each year are available for religious workers employed by a broad range of religious denominations, including those represented here.

Unfortunately, in recent years, rather than reauthorizing the program for multiple years at a time, as was the practice earlier on in the RWVP's history, Congress has opted to include language reauthorizing it for one year in each year's Homeland Security appropriations bill. That leaves both religious organizations and individuals that depend on the visas, as well as U.S. government officials adjudicating them, uncertain about whether the program will continue. The current authorization is set to expire with the continuing resolution on December 16, 2022. Failure to extend it would greatly diminish our ability to tap into the potential of immigrant non-ministers to staff our religious institutions and respond to the urgent needs of the communities we serve.

Religious communities throughout the United States that participate in the program have found these visas vital to carrying out their work. Non-minister special immigrants bring linguistic and cultural competency to provide critical services in areas including religious instruction, education, and care for vulnerable populations, such as the elderly, immigrants, refugees, the homeless and hungry, abused and neglected children, and families at risk. Others work in areas as diverse as performing religious outreach, designing and building houses of worship, producing religious publications, sustaining prison ministries, and training health care professionals to provide religiously appropriate health care, as well as religious functionaries who are specially trained in performing specific religious rites and requirements. Their presence is essential for us to respond effectively to the dynamic intercultural realities of modern America.

¹ See generally, U.S. CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, THE NON-MINISTER SPECIAL IMMIGRANT RELIGIOUS WORKER VISA PROGRAM (Oct. 2022), <https://bit.ly/3TC0JtM>.

² Immigration Act of 1990, P.L. 101-649, 104 Stat. 4978, 5027.

Below are just a few examples of how the non-minister special immigrant visa is used by different faith traditions:

- The Jewish community has successfully utilized non-minister special immigrant visas to fill various positions, including religious studies teachers, chazzanim (cantors), mohalim (ritual circumcisers), shochatim (kosher slaughterers), mashgichim (kosher food certifiers) and shamashim (synagogues sextons). Placement of these religious functionaries has been extremely beneficial, sometimes critical, in filling personnel gaps and shortages and in serving Jewish communities on the national and state levels, particularly in non-urban areas where Jewish populations are small and more remote.
- Hindu Americans have not yet established institutions to train religious workers, and Hindu temples remain dependent on non-minister special immigrant visas to bring religious workers from India to serve in a variety of essential roles. These workers include Pandits/Pujaris (Hindu priest), Paricharakaras (religious food preparer for Hindu worship services), Sthapatis (traditionally trained Hindu religious architects and builders), Shilpis (traditionally trained religious artisans and sculptors), and Hindu religious artists such as Odhuvaars (traditional Tamil religious devotional singers central to worship services), to name a few.
- For Catholic institutions, non-minister special immigrant visas are utilized most often for religious sisters and brothers. For example, women religious with this visa have staffed health care facilities in rural areas of the United States for decades, serving as nurses, counselors, administrators, and in other roles. Without them, many Americans would lack access to reliable medical care, as well as culturally and linguistically competent services depended upon by immigrant populations.

We would greatly appreciate your support for and Congress' enactment of a permanent extension of the non-minister special immigrant portion of the Religious Worker Visa Program. Please direct any questions about this letter or the program to David Spicer (dspicer@uscceb.org), senior policy advisor for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Department of Migration and Refugee Services.

Sincerely,

Agudath Israel of America
Bruderhof
Claretian Missionaries, USA-Canada Province
Conference of Major Superiors of Men
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
Church of Scientology National Affairs Office
Church World Service
The Episcopal Church
Glenmary Home Missioners
HIAS
Hindu American Foundation
Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States
Leadership Conference of Women Religious
Migration and Refugee Services, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops
Religions for Peace USA
Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America
U.S. Council of Muslim Organizations
Western Dominican Province

CC: All U.S. Senators and Representatives