



Senator Michael E. Dembrow
Senate District 23

February 28, 2023

Chair Taylor, Vice-Chair Bonham, Committee members, I'm Michael Dembrow, the Senator for District 23, Northeast/Southeast Portland.

Thank you for this hearing on SB 849, a bill to bring more immigrant and refugees professionals into Oregon's workforce, where their service is badly needed.

Colleagues, some of you may know that for a number of years I've been a member of NCSL's taskforce on immigration and the states. As is typical for NCSL task forces, it consists of legislators from around the country, half Democrat, half Republican, with co-chairs from each party. We meet with federal agency representatives, visit the border, hear about the challenges states are facing as a result of our outdated immigration laws, recommend NCSL policy proposals around immigration issues and workforce issues.

We don't always agree on positions, but we do consistently agree on one thing: the need to address the problem of what has been come to be called Brainwaste—the underemployment of immigrants and refugees who are forced to work jobs that do not take advantage of their skills, training, and experience.

We have many professionals who had to come to this country for the safety of their families and have not been able to practice their professions. They work as taxi drivers, grocery clerks, home health aides, CNAs, when they could be serving their communities as nurses, physicians, psychologists, and more. Why would they do that? Because they face barrier after barrier in getting recredentialed. Sometimes it's the result of transcripts that no longer exist, the

product of universities that no longer exist. Sometimes it's the result of arbitrary English language requirements that have nothing to do with the actual world of work.

Colleagues, to begin to address the problem of Brainwaste, with strong advocacy from the Portland Business Alliance's Partners in Diversity, the Legislature passed SB 855 in 2019. It directed the state's occupational licensing boards to assess their licensing processes, identify barriers to licensure for immigrants and refugees previously credentialed in their home countries, and identify steps that could be taken to remove those barriers. Colleagues, although the different boards were uneven in the thoroughness of their responses, they all pointed in the same direction: we have a lot of work to do in Oregon if we are to seize the moment and join other states in accelerating the recredentialing process and increasing the number of providers with the technical, cultural, and linguistic skills to better serve our communities at large, along with the particular immigrant and refugee communities of which they are a part.

Colleagues, whatever we can do to remove the hurdles that keep these practitioners from being able to serve us and their communities to the best of their abilities, the better. That's what SB 849 will do. It will bring us in line with what other forward-thinking states are doing. You'll hear more about its details from our colleague, Senator Jama, whose office has taken the lead on developing this legislation, along with several people with expertise in this area.

Let me close with a little vision of what's possible. About five years ago I had the honor of attending the graduation ceremony for a unique—but sadly short-lived pilot nursing program at Clackamas Community College sponsored by IRCO, Oregon's Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization. This fast-track program was designed to allow health professionals who had formerly been practitioners of various sorts in their home countries to become RNs in a year. The graduating class consisted of 20 or so newly-minted nurses from all over the globe. The room was full of their family and friends. The love and excitement in the room was truly palpable, and the tears were flowing freely. These men and women were about to embark on careers that they never thought possible. This pilot made it possible.

But sadly, as so often happens with pilots, it was short-lived and never found the funding to continue. This was not long before the onset of the pandemic, just as we were about to experience the greatest shortage in the nursing workforce that we had ever experienced. What a waste.

Colleagues, it's time to end this kind of Brainwaste. I urge your support for SB 849.

Sincerely,



Michael E. Dembrow

Senator, SD 23

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