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Contact: Liz Cross, Rural Healthcare Coordinator

J1Visa@nbroc.gov

(603) 369-3001

NBRC Announces Initiative to Bring Physicians To Rural Areas of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York

The Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC) announces the launch of its **J-1 Visa Waiver Program** in collaboration with Maine, New Hampshire, New York, and Vermont in an ongoing effort to provide rural and underserved areas with adequate access to quality, affordable healthcare. The new program will help address the national healthcare provider shortage by easing the visa requirements for physicians who are trained in the United States if they agree to practice in underserved areas of the Northern Border Region. NBRC will recommend the U.S. Department of Homeland Security waive what is known as the “two-year home-country physical presence requirement” for eligible physicians seeking to work at health care institutions and practices within the NBRC territory.

“Rural communities face many challenges to economic well-being. Access to healthcare is one such challenge that is particularly difficult for rural areas to address on their own and is critical to maintaining a vibrant community,” said **NBRC Federal Co-Chair Chris Saunders**. “As part of the Biden Administration’s commitment to rural communities, it is with great excitement that the Commission undertakes this effort to address the region’s healthcare workforce shortages and bolster one of the underlying elements that make economic development possible.”

The NBRC will consider recommending a waiver on behalf of eligible J-1 physicians who will work in Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSA) and Medically Underserved Areas (MUA). Eligible physicians will work in primary or mental health care for at least three years and 40 hours per week within a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services designated HPSA or MUA of the Northern Border Region. The program is modeled, in part, after the Appalachian Regional Commission’s (ARC) successful J-1 Visa waiver program.

State partners in New York and New Hampshire showed early support in favor of implementing a waiver expansion program in the Northern Border Region. The Commission acknowledges the Members of Congress from the NBRC region who have encouraged the Agency to utilize its authority to develop this program.

“The Northern Border Regional Commission has been a tremendous asset to New Hampshire, and I’m thrilled to see the launch of their new initiative to address health care staffing shortages in our rural communities,” said **Congresswoman Kuster**. “We have the tools to bring more qualified doctors and physicians to our region to address gaps in health care access and ensure every family can get the quality care they need. I was proud to advocate for this initiative, and I will continue working to strengthen health care access in northern New Hampshire and throughout the region.”

“Following my advocacy, the Northern Border Regional Commission will launch its J-1 Visa Program to help provide rural and underserved areas across Upstate New York and the North Country with accessible, quality, and affordable healthcare helping to alleviate the physician shortage I have been working tirelessly to address,” said **Congresswoman Elise Stefanik**. “Last week, I heard directly from a NY-21 constituent in Copenhagen about how the physician shortage in her area was affecting her family’s access to healthcare, during my Medicare Telephone Town Hall. These physicians will provide critical medical services in rural areas of our states currently suffering from physician staffing shortages.”

“The shortage of healthcare providers can present many challenges for residents who live in rural areas to stay healthy,” said **New York Secretary of State, Robert J. Rodriguez**. “Through our Northern Border Regional Commission program, the New York Department of State works every day to ensure equal opportunities for all New Yorkers and is proud to have played a role in the expansion of these waivers to improve access to physicians within underserved rural communities.”

“In rural communities like ours, the chronic physician shortage has very real implications for the people we serve. Longer wait times for appointments, required travel for people who may already have transportation challenges and reduced time with physicians – all of this impacts the quality of care provided to patients. The J-1 Waiver program will help alleviate some of these obstacles by making it possible for more physicians to remain in this country and practice,” said **Lisa Mark, MD, Regional Physician Leader, University of Vermont Health Network Medical Group**.

“Our gratitude to the NBRC for bringing this initiative forward and thank you to government leaders and elected officials for their

support. This program is a great example of what can be accomplished when we work together to be sure those living in rural areas have equitable access to necessary care,” offered **Alice Hyde Medical Center and CVPH President Michelle LeBeau**.

“Access to quality health care is vital for all New Yorkers, which is why the State Health Department continues to work with the Northern Border Regional Commission and the Department of State to expand these waivers to provide greater access to physicians within our underserved rural communities—a commitment to ensuring quality health services are available to everyone, no matter where they live,” **State Health Commissioner Dr. James McDonald** said. “The Department continues to focus on ensuring our rural communities have access to critical health care services, including transportation and emergency medical services.”

Requests for waivers through the J-1 Visa Waiver Program must first be sponsored by a state within NBRC’s region, all of which have collaborated closely to complement each state’s pre-existing Conrad 30 waiver programs. Contact information for J-1 Program specialists in Maine, New Hampshire, New York, and Vermont can be found on nbrc.gov.

Created in 2008, the Northern Border Regional Commission is a federal-state partnership whose mission is to help alleviate economic distress and encourage private sector job creation in Maine, New Hampshire, New York, and Vermont.