

As Seen In

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Visas may be Rx for RN shortage, but few are forthcoming

Government limits create bottlenecks

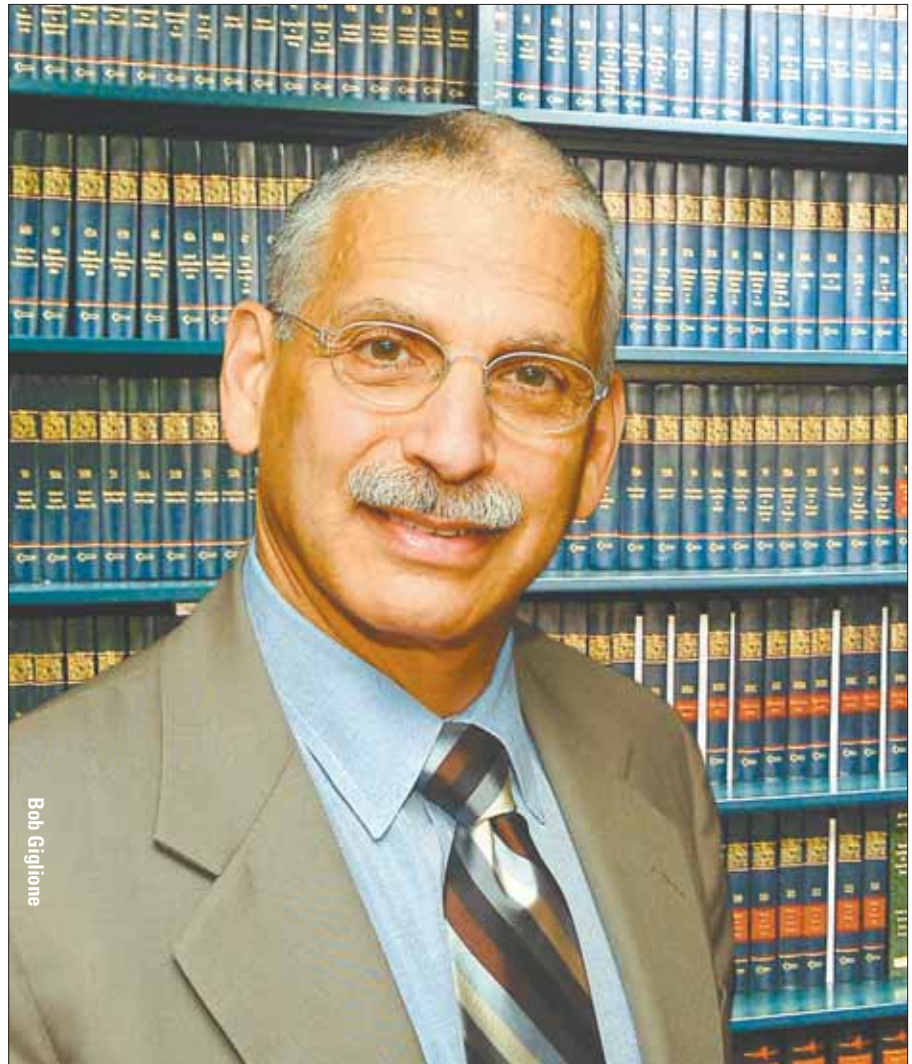
By **CLAUDE SOLNIK**

One simple solution to the nursing shortage is to snag nurses from other countries. Or so it would seem.

South Nassau Communities Hospital has done more than lay out a welcome mat for nurses coming from abroad: It's even built housing for them. But despite its efforts, there are plenty of empty rooms at this inn. And the hospital could use the nurses: South Nassau's nursing staff works overtime and the hospital has vacancies that, its executives say, it hasn't been able to fill.

A shortage of visas is stopping hospitals from bringing over nurses who they say are waiting, willing and qualified to work in the United States, exacerbating the shortage.

Nurses typically come to the United States on what's known as EB3 visas. The problem is the govern-



Robert Wild, of Garfunkel, Wild & Travis, said that the bureaucratic process is creating a bottleneck.

ment allocates quotas of these permanent resident visas for professionals to each nation. India, the Philippines and China have used up their quotas.

"They are the countries where we exhausted our visas," Mooney said. "And those are the countries that produce the most nurses."

Robert Wild, chairman of law firm Garfunkel, Wild & Travis in Great Neck, sees an immigration bottleneck.

"There are limitations depending on the country. The process of obtaining visas is bureaucratic," Wild said. "The combination of fewer people going in or staying in nursing and the difficulty in bringing in nurses from foreign countries makes the problem acute."

Increasing opportunities for women in other professions may be swaying some women who otherwise might have become nurses. Homecare is attracting nurses who previously would work in hospitals.

"There is a tremendous shortage of nurses throughout New York State," Wild said, noting this phenomenon extends beyond Long Island hospitals.

Health-care providers are

pushing for the release of more visas for nurses from these nations, so far without success.

Kevin Dahill, president and CEO of the Nassau-Suffolk Hospital Council based in Hauppauge, said the problem isn't that legislators want to stop nurses from immigrating. "Everybody accepts the fact that we have a nursing shortage and we have qualified nurses willing and able to come over here," Dahill said. "That doesn't cause the controversy."

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Dahill said the nurses' visas are getting tangled up in larger immigration issues and a debate extending from farm workers to Ph.D.s.

He said legislation to permit nurses to work here typically gets linked to efforts to provide visas for farm workers and others. "Then the controversy begins," Dahill said.

Sen. Charles Schumer (D-Brooklyn) proposed taking visas unused by certain coun-

tries and making them available to nations that reached quotas. That measure could easily open tens of thousand of visas.

"They've done this before," Mooney said. "They did it April of 2005. That carried us for 18 months."

As Congress fiddles while a nursing shortage burns, not all hospitals are feeling the sting. North Shore-Long Island Jewish Health System spokesman Terry Lynam said the 15-hospital system is able to meet demand.

"Nursing recruitment has not been as big of a problem for us as for other hospitals," Lynam said. "We stepped up our recruiting efforts."

Lynam said that tuition reimbursement for nurses who want bachelors, masters and doctorates helps. North Shore-LIJ also backs programs to train its employees to become nurses.

But the stranglehold on nurses' visas is creating shortages at other hospitals. One stop-gap solution: "We have Filipino nurses coming from Dubai" as a way to circumvent quotas, Mooney said. "We've gone over to recruit them there." ■