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## **First Bill To Ease Nursing Shortage Introduced**

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Rep. Tom Lantos (D., Calif.) introduced last week the first bill in the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress to address the nursing shortage.

To be known as the “Health Improvement and Professionals Act of 2005,” the bill seeks to recapture unused employment-based immigrant visa numbers from 2001 to the present to facilitate improved health care for all persons in the US.

The bill, if passed, is expected to ease considerably the backlog in the employment-based third preference for the Philippines, China and India which has resulted in retrogression to January 1, 2002.

The employment-based third preference refers to professionals and skilled workers. Included under this category are teachers, accountants, therapists and computer professionals who will also benefit from the bill.

Lantos said that it is “ridiculous” that amid a nursing shortage, the US is turning away large numbers of registered nurses from abroad due to bureaucratic

constraints. Aside from this bill, Lantos said that he will explore longer term solutions to the shortage.

Filipino nurses who are slated to fill the severely understaffed medical facilities in the US were among the hardest hit by the regression.

The American Hospital Association in a recent statement urged Congress to “act immediately to help ensure that hospitals can continue to rely on highly qualified foreign RNs as they work to address their serious staff shortages and meet the needs of their patients and communities.” The AHA directed its plea for immediate legislation to the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress.

The bill is similar to a law passed four years ago called the American Competitiveness in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Act. This law allowed unused visa numbers from 1999 to 2000 to be used by 3<sup>rd</sup> preference visa applicants and has been the reason why the visa numbers for the Philippines has remained current until recently.

Since the passage of that law, a large number of employment-based visas have not been used, including more than 50,000 visas in fiscal year 2003 alone.