

August Recess 2025 Toolkit:

Religious Workforce Protection Act

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United States Conference
of Catholic Bishops

Migration and
Refugee Services

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Background: Religious Worker Visa Program

The current Religious Worker Visa Program (RWVP) can be traced back to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1990, when Congress established immigrant and nonimmigrant visa categories specifically for foreign-born religious workers. Congress recognized that the U.S. immigration system up to that point was not responsive to the unique characteristics of religious workers or their employers, and existing legal pathways were not adequate to meet the needs of American communities. Given the fundamental importance of the free exercise of religion, as enshrined in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, and the positive impacts of religious workers on society, a solution was needed. Thus, the RWVP we know today was created. Today, foreign-born religious workers are relied upon by a wide range of religious traditions across every state in the nation, and these workers provide essential services to people of many different faiths, as well as those of no faith at all.

Religious Workers and their Impact

The RWVP is available to foreign-born ministers and non-ministers in religious vocations and occupations who have a U.S.-based religious organization willing to sponsor them. This includes priests, deacons, pastors, rabbis, imams, religious sister and brothers, monks, missionaries, cantors, and others. These workers provide a variety of religious and social services. For example, in the Catholic context, through the RWVP, foreign-born priests serve as parish pastors, religious sisters teach in schools, and lay missionaries conduct outreach to those in isolated communities. While one might assume this dependence on foreign-born religious workers stems solely from a shortage of domestic vocations, the need goes far beyond that. In a country as diverse as the United States, religious workers from other countries bring with them linguistic and cultural expertise that match the demographics of American communities. Without the contributions of such workers, many religious organizations, including Catholic dioceses, would not be able to carry out their missions and untold numbers of people would have limited or no access to the essential religious and social services they provide.

Two Legal Pathways

The RWVP is comprised of two different visas:

- **Temporary Nonimmigrant Religious Worker (R-1) Visa**
 - This is a short-term visa that allows religious workers to serve in the United States for up to five years. Once a religious worker reaches that five-year mark, he or she will generally need to depart the country, unless the person has another basis to remain lawfully in the United States.
 - It is possible to return on a subsequent R-1 visa, but someone must be outside of the country for at least one year between R-1 visas, based on current regulations.
 - There is an unlimited number of R-1 visas available each year.

- ***Permanent Special Immigrant Religious Worker (EB-4) Visa***

- The special immigrant religious worker visa relies on a broader category of visas known as the employment-based, fourth preference visa (hence the use of “EB-4” as a shorthand). The EB-4 visa category is shared by several other classes of immigrants besides religious workers.
- When a U.S. religious organization sponsors a worker through the EB-4 category, he or she can receive lawful permanent resident status in the United States, otherwise known as a green card. This process can be started when someone is inside the United States (e.g., on an R-1 visa) or outside the country.
- The EB-4 visa category is limited to a total of about 10,000 visas per year, spread across religious workers and the other classes of immigrants assigned to the category.
- For this visa, there is also a distinction made between ministers and non-ministers, as defined by the U.S. government. The non-minister portion of the program (what would be used for religious sisters/brothers and other laypersons in the Catholic Church) has never been made permanent, so Congress must regularly extend the program to keep it from expiring. Additionally, no more than 5,000 of the total number of EB-4 visas granted per year can go to people classified as non-ministers.

Recent Challenges Related to the EB-4 Visa

During the first 30 years of the RWVP, it was possible for a religious worker in the United States on an R-1 visa to apply for and receive a green card through the EB-4 visa category before reaching the end of the R-1 visa’s five-year limit. However, this is no longer the case. Today, because of a backlog in the EB-4 category, all religious workers on an R-1 visa who have requested permanent status will reach their five-year maximum period of stay before their green card becomes available, forcing them to abandon their ministries. As a result, parishes lose pastors, hospitals lose chaplains, and the free exercise of religion is diminished for people who rely on the spiritual leadership of foreign-born religious workers.

The EB-4 backlog has grown so much that a priest or other religious worker beginning the process today is expected to face a projected wait of over 20 years before an EB-4 visa will become available (based on the more than 200,000 people currently in line for an EB-4 visa and the approximately 10,000 EB-4 visas issued annually). This backlog is largely attributed to the fact that the EB-4 category is shared by religious workers, several other classes of employment-based immigrants (including international broadcasters and employees of NATO), and a class of vulnerable children known as special immigrant juveniles (SIJ). Among other requirements, SIJ status requires a finding of parental abuse, abandonment, neglect, or a similar basis under state law by a state juvenile court and a determination by the court that it is not in the youth’s best interest to return to his or her country of origin.

The number of youth in the United States who are eligible for SIJ status has been increasing since 2013, corresponding to an overall increase in the number of unaccompanied children arriving in the country since then, primarily from Central America. As a result, in 2016, the U.S. Department of State began prorating EB-4 visas for all applicants from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador—not only for SIJ applicants but also for religious workers and others in the EB-4 category applying from those countries. Essentially, this resulted in a longer wait for applicants from those three countries, but applicants from other countries could receive an EB-4 visa more quickly. However, in early 2023, the State Department determined that this was inconsistent with federal law and stopped prorating EB-4 visas for applicants from these three countries, which greatly expanded the backlog for applicants from all other countries. The EB-4 backlog has only continued to grow since then, with SIJ applicants making up the vast majority of applicants.

Recognizing the injustice and inconsistency of having SIJ applicants rely on an employment-based visa category—when they are actually receiving humanitarian relief—the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has supported legislation, known as the Protect Vulnerable Immigrant Youth Act, that would exempt SIJ applicants from the EB-4 visa cap. This would provide youth deemed eligible for SIJ status immediate access to legal protection, while freeing up the employment-based visas for religious workers and others who are more accurately described as employment-based immigrants. However, the bill lacks bipartisan support, and Congress has made no effort to move it forward. Meanwhile, religious workers, their employers, and the communities they serve face increasing hardship caused by the constraints on the RWVP.

Additional Information

- [R-1 Nonimmigrant Religious Workers | USCIS](#)
- [Special Immigrant Religious Workers | USCIS](#)
- [Employment-Based Immigration: Fourth Preference | USCIS](#)
- [April 2023 Change Impacting Special Immigrant Religious Workers | USCCB](#)
- [R-1 Status: A Temporary Path for Religious Work | CLINIC](#)
- [Advocacy Toolkit: Religious Workers Are Essential | CLINIC](#)

Religious Workforce Protection Act

The Religious Workforce Protection Act (RWPA) ([H.R. 2672](#) / [S. 1298](#)) was introduced in April 2025 as a targeted source of relief for the challenges facing the Religious Worker Visa Program. If enacted, the RWPA would allow R-1 visa holders in the United States who have begun the green card process through the EB-4 visa category to request that the Secretary of Homeland Security extend their R-1 status beyond the usual five-year limit until they can receive a green card. As a result, American communities could continue to benefit from the contributions of religious workers without interruption, consistent with the intent of Congress when it created the RWVP.

The bill was introduced on a bipartisan basis in both the House and Senate. The following members have formally cosponsored it thus far:

House

- Representative Mike Carey (R-OH-15)*
- Representative Richard Neal (D-MA-1)*
- Representative Maria Salazar (R-FL-27)*
- Representative Pete Stauber (R-MN-8)*
- Representative Jimmy Panetta (D-CA-19)
- Representative Tracey Mann (R-KS-1)
- Representative Jim Costa (D-CA-21)
- Representative Raja Krishnamoorthi (D-IL-8)

Senate

- Senator Tim Kaine (D-VA)*
- Senator Susan Collins (R-ME)*
- Senator James Risch (R-ID)*
- Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC)
- Senator Christopher Coons (D-DE)
- Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK)
- Senator Mike Crapo (R-ID)

**Original cosponsor when the bill was introduced*

What does the bill do?

The bill has three substantive sections:

- **Section 2:** Grants the Secretary of Homeland Security the authority to extend temporary R-1 status for a religious worker beyond five years until he or she receives a decision on an EB-4 application, so long as (1) a qualifying religious institution has petitioned for the worker's lawful permanent residence under the EB-4 category, and (2) the worker is otherwise eligible to become a lawful permanent resident (i.e., not subject to any existing visa eligibility bars) but for the EB-4 visa backlog.

- **Section 3:** Corrects a discrepancy between religious workers and other employment-based immigrants by allowing for limited job flexibility while religious workers are awaiting permanent residence. This would prevent religious workers from having to restart the entire process from the beginning because, for example, they moved from one church to another or received a new title. However, they must continue to serve as religious workers.
- **Section 4:** Makes it clear that religious workers who were already forced to depart the United States before the bill became law, but who could have extended R-1 status if the bill had been enacted, are not required to be outside of the country for one year before they can return in R-1 status. This will allow American communities to reunite more quickly with beloved religious workers.

Why is legislative action necessary?

Because the number of EB-4 visas is limited by statute and religious workers are limited by law to no more than five years in the United States on an R-1 visa, only Congress can provide relief for those impacted by the current situation. While Congress could take several different approaches, such as increasing the number of visas provided for the EB-4 category or creating a separate allocation of visas for religious workers, the RWPA reflects a very narrow approach that is designed to garner the most bipartisan support.

Which members of Congress are most influential for the RWPA's passage?

When it was introduced, the RWPA was referred to the House and Senate Judiciary Committees, so the chairmen of those committees (Representative Jim Jordan of Ohio and Senator Chuck Grassley of Iowa, respectively) could play an outsized role in the RWPA's future. In addition, having support from the members of those committees, especially those in the majority (House and Senate Republicans), enhances the bill's prospects for becoming law. The list of House Judiciary Committee members is [here](#), and the list of Senate Judiciary Committee members is [here](#). Leadership in the House and Senate also play a key role in moving most legislation forward. This includes House Speaker Mike Johnson of Louisiana, House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries of New York, Senate Majority Leader John Thune of South Dakota and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York.

August Recess and the Need for Grassroots Advocacy

What is the August recess, and why is it a good opportunity for advocacy?

Every year, both chambers of Congress adjourn for a period known as the “August recess.” Senators and representatives return to their states and districts. This is intended as a time for constituent engagement. Members of Congress hold town halls, attend local events, and meet with the people they were elected to represent. Additionally, members and their staff have fewer things vying for their attention while ordinary legislative business—hearings, votes, etc.—are on hold. This makes it an ideal time for grassroots advocates to speak personally with senators and representatives and raise awareness about specific issues.

When does the August recess begin and end?

For 2025, the House has already begun its August recess, and the Senate is scheduled to begin its recess on August 4. Both chambers are expected to return from recess on September 2. It’s possible for one or both chambers to be called back to Washington early if something pressing arises, though that is rare.

Why do members of Congress need to hear from constituents about the RWPA?

Constituent outreach on an issue conveys that it is important to the very people a member of Congress was elected to represent, greatly increasing the chances of action. Constituents are also able to share personal stories that demonstrate how communities within a state or district are impacted. For the RWPA, that means talking about, for example, how a cherished priest will soon have to depart the country, leaving thousands of parishioners unsure about whether they will be able to access the sacraments. Or how a women’s shelter will soon be losing a religious sister who is well known in the community for providing compassionate accompaniment to those who have experienced abuse. These personal stories help not only to humanize policy but to underscore the negative consequences if Congress fails to act.

Given everything that’s happening with immigration right now, why advocate for the RWPA?

There are many migration-related issues worthy of advocacy today, from the plight of refugees impacted by the suspension of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program to the ways current immigration enforcement measures threaten family unity. However, very few specific migration-related measures have a realistic chance of passage in the current political climate, and the RWPA has a better chance than most, especially since it does not address immigration per se. Meanwhile, prioritizing advocacy on the RWPA does not in any way negate the importance of those other issues, but it is a bill that could generate positive momentum for further bipartisan, solutions-oriented action in a highly polarized environment. The end of the year may also present a strategic window for RWPA passage, particularly as Congress works on finalizing appropriations for the coming year, making August recess an opportune time to engage on the bill.

Key Message and Talking Points

- **The Religious Workforce Protection Act is a straightforward, targeted, and common-sense measure that would benefit communities across every state in the nation.**
 - **If Congress does not act quickly, a growing number of men and women who have faithfully served for years in the United States will be forced to abandon their ministries, creating tremendous hardship for the workers, their employers, and those they serve.**
 - **At its core, the RWPA is about promoting the free exercise of religion—a nonpartisan and foundational American ideal.**
-

- With it now projected to take over 20 years for a religious worker caught in the EB-4 backlog to receive permanent status in the United States, it is simply not sustainable for these workers to abandon their ministries and possibly return after a full year outside of the country.
- The RWPA does not alter the number of people who can immigrate to the United States. Those who would be eligible for relief under the bill are already lawfully present and legally working in the country, and they would need to meet all eligibility requirements for permanent residence under the EB-4 category for their R-1 status to be extended.
- If anything, the RWPA would reduce the need for religious organizations to identify new workers to come to the United States on an R-1 visa to serve in the place of those workers forced to depart. With the relief provided by the bill, those who have already spent several years acclimating to a community, building relationships, and making positive impacts could continue serving without interruption.
- While the total number of religious workers who could benefit from this legislation is relatively small (with a rough estimate of under 30,000 in the EB-4 backlog), the number of people positively impacted by the RWPA's passage grows exponentially when considering the hundreds of people served by the average religious worker.
- Rural and isolated parts of the country are likely to be disproportionately impacted by the situation the RWPA seeks to address. For example, the Diocese of Boise estimated that nearly a quarter of the priests serving in Idaho will reach the end of their R-1 visas in the next couple of years, impacting an estimated 8,000 families who rely on them (approximately 36,000 Idahoans). Because churches in this region are spread farther distances apart, it is more difficult for remaining priests to provide coverage for Mass and other needs.

- The impact of this situation reaches far beyond the Catholic Church. Many religious traditions in the United States rely on foreign-born religious workers, and every one of them is confronted by the EB-4 backlog. Meanwhile, some lack U.S.-based institutions of formation, so they rely even more heavily on foreign-born religious workers.
- There is precedent in existing law for the sort of relief provided through the RWPA (i.e., extending a person's nonimmigrant status beyond the usual limit). The same type of flexibility proposed in the bill for religious workers is already available to certain other employment-based immigrants facing visa backlogs.
- Even though other immigrants are impacted by visa backlogs, the situation addressed by the RWPA is unique because of the services religious workers provide and the ways in which Americans rely on them to practice their faith. Additionally, foreign-born religious workers and their employers have very limited access to alternative legal pathways. Congress specifically created the RWPA to ensure communities have access to the religious workers they require, allowing for the free exercise of religion, and that purpose is not being fulfilled.
- Religious organizations seeking to sponsor workers on R-1 visas must provide evidence demonstrating their status as a bona fide religious entity, along with evidence of each worker's membership in the religious tradition for at least two years prior to beginning the process. As part of their participation in the Religious Worker Visa Program, organizations must also consent to on-site inspections, which can occur before and after someone arrives on an R-1 visa, to verify the information provided and ensure program integrity.

Possible Advocacy Actions

A. Request a Meeting

One of the most effective forms of advocacy is a face-to-face meeting with your legislators or their staff. If a face-to-face meeting isn't possible, a virtual meeting could be requested instead. Below is a general guide for arranging and attending meetings with elected officials:

1. Assemble a Team

If possible, form a small group to attend the meeting that includes multiple constituents or stakeholders. You may consider assembling an interfaith group to underscore the impact of this situation across faith traditions.

2. Identify Your Member of Congress and Submit a Meeting Request

The [USCCB's Action Center](#) can be used to locate information for your two senators and House member. The websites of most members of Congress have a form or email address that can be used to request in-state/in-district meetings with the office. You can also request a meeting via phone. Try to make your meeting request as soon as possible to maximize your chances of getting on the schedule. Don't be discouraged if the member of Congress is unable to meet and you are offered a meeting with staff instead—staff play a critical role in moving issues forward. When making a request, be prepared to share the following pieces of information: your name and the town/city where you live; what you want to discuss (challenges facing religious workers and the need for the Religious Workforce Protection Act); the names of anyone else joining you for the meeting; and 2–3 possible dates/times for the meeting.

3. Prepare Your Message

In advance of your meeting, organize your talking points, and be prepared with a personal story or local examples that connect the issue to your community. If a group is attending the meeting, assign roles (e.g., notetaker, timekeeper, etc.). Rehearse introductions and key points. Be concise and respectful of time. You can bring the one-pager and other materials included in the Annex of this toolkit as leave-behind materials.

4. During the Meeting

Start with introductions. If you're meeting with the member of Congress, your time will likely be limited (e.g., you may only have a few minutes with the member, followed by a longer meeting with staff). Generally, your meeting will be no longer than half an hour.

You do not have to be a policy expert or have all the answers; you are there to share your personal perspective and connection to the issue. If you are asked a question you don't know, you can always offer to get back to them or [request that someone from the USCCB follow up with the office](#).

Be specific with your ask: “Would [you/the Representative/the Senator] be willing to cosponsor the Religious Workforce Protection Act?”

Remember: your voice matters, and what you have to say is important. Your main goal is not to convince but to connect and share.

Before leaving the office, make sure to grab the business card for the person from the office who staffed your meeting.

5. Follow-Up Items

Within a couple days of the meeting, send a thank you email, restating your appreciation for the meeting and summarizing the key points. Follow up on any commitments from the meeting.

If you have unanswered questions or noteworthy insights from the meeting to pass along to USCCB staff, please submit them through this [feedback form](#).

B. Attend a Town Hall or Public Event

During August recess, it is common for members of Congress to host town halls back in their states/districts. These public forums allow them to interact with a larger number of constituents at the same time. In addition to hearing what legislators have to share about their work and current events, attendees have an opportunity to ask questions. Town halls are usually advertised through senators’ and representatives’ websites, social media pages, and newsletters. Registration in advance may be required.

Once you’ve identified a town hall to attend, come prepared with a brief request related to the RWPA. For example: “As a person of faith, I am concerned about the challenges facing foreign-born religious workers in our country. These workers provide essential services, and they are having to abandon their ministries because of a backlog in the EB-4 visa category. The bipartisan Religious Workforce Protection Act would provide very targeted relief for those in this situation. Will you support this bill as a way to ensure our community can continue to benefit from the contributions of religious workers?”

This is another instance when sharing a personal story or an example of local impact is helpful, so try to weave that in if possible.

C. Call/Send a Message to Your Legislator

Whether it’s August recess or any other time of year, calling and sending messages to members of Congress are also valuable ways for constituents to communicate their concerns directly to their elected officials. The more calls and messages an office receives about an issue, the more likely they are to address that issue because they know it is a priority for constituents.

The USCCB’s Justice for Immigrants campaign provides a streamlined way for advocates to [send a message or call their members of Congress](#) about the RWPA. The draft message can also be edited for non-Catholic supporters using this tool (i.e., so the message does not begin “As a Catholic and your constituent...”).

D. Write a Letter to the Editor

Members of Congress and their staff often monitor local papers to gauge constituents’ concerns. A letter to the editor can draw attention to the importance of the RWPA within your community and signal public support. When crafting a letter to the editor, here are some tips to keep in mind:

- Keep it concise (most publications prefer between 150 and 300 words).
- Respectfully encourage your representative/senators by name to support the Religious Workforce Protection Act. If one or more of your legislators has/have already cosponsored the bill, express gratitude.
- Include a local perspective or relevant personal story.
- Try to be timely by linking your letter to a recent event or media coverage.

E. Share Feedback

No matter what form of engagement you undertake related to the RWPA, you are encouraged to share any noteworthy insights and follow-up questions with USCCB staff via this [feedback form](#).

Prayers

Prayer for Religious Workers

Heavenly Father,
You call men and women from every corner of the earth
to serve with love, humility, and courage.
We thank you for the priests, deacons, religious sisters and brothers,
lay missionaries, and all who dedicate their lives to the work of your Church.
Grant them fortitude in their labors,
comfort in times of trial,
faith in moments of doubt,
and the freedom to serve faithfully.
Fill their hearts with the fire of your Spirit,
that they may proclaim the Gospel boldly through word and deed
and serve your people with joy and compassion.
May their example inspire others to hear and answer your call.
We ask all this through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Prayer for Vocations

Loving God,
We are your people, the work of your hands.
So precious are we in your sight that you sent your only son, Jesus,
who calls us to heal the broken-hearted,
to dry the tears of those who mourn,
to give hope to those who despair,
and to rejoice in your steadfast love.
We, the baptized, realize our call to serve.
Help us to know how.
Call forth from among us priests, sisters, brothers, and lay ministers.
With our hearts you continue to love your people.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
God forever and ever.
Amen.

Appendix

1. [USCCB RWPA Letter of Support](#)
2. [Interfaith RWPA Letter of Support](#)
3. [RWPA One-Pager](#)



April 10, 2025

Dear Senator/Representative:

We write on behalf of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) to express our strong support for the Religious Workforce Protection Act (RWPA) (S. 1298/H.R. 2672), which was recently introduced on a bipartisan basis. We urge you to join with your colleagues in cosponsoring this vital measure and to work toward its immediate passage, thereby furthering the free exercise of religion in our country for the benefit of all Americans.

The RWPA is desperately needed to ensure communities across our nation can continue to enjoy the essential contributions of foreign-born religious workers who lawfully entered the United States on a nonimmigrant religious worker (R-1) visa. Numbered among them are many Catholic priests, as well as religious sisters and brothers. Unfortunately, a significant backlog in the employment-based, fourth preference (EB-4) visa category depended upon by these workers for permanent status in the United States threatens to disrupt the services they provide to Americans of many different faiths, as well as those of no faith at all.

Relying on precedent in existing law, this simple, targeted measure would provide relief to workers and their employers who are confronted by this situation without increasing the number of people permitted to immigrate to the United States. Under the RWPA, those already in the United States on an R-1 visa (normally capped at five years) who have applied for adjustment of status would be able to remain in the country in their current nonimmigrant status for renewable, three-year periods until they are able to receive a green card. This would allow them to continue serving American communities without interruption.

In the absence of this relief, R-1 visa holders awaiting adjustment are forced to depart the country and abandon their ministries. Moreover, under existing regulations, those faced with this situation cannot return on a subsequent R-1 visa for at least one year,¹ creating significant hardship for the workers, their employers, and the people they serve. Unfortunately, this has already occurred in far too many cases, having an impact on Catholics and non-Catholics alike.² The RWPA would apply retroactively to individuals who were forced to depart the United States prior to its enactment and remain subject to the one-year requirement. Additionally, this bill would extend the same

¹ 8 C.F.R. § 214.2(r)(15).

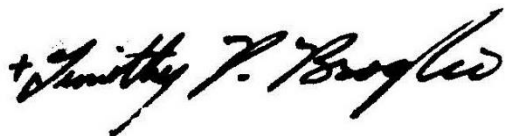
² See, e.g., Katie Zakrzewski, *US Changes to Religious Worker Visas Could Affect Priests Ministering in Arkansas, Other Dioceses*, OSV News (Oct. 24, 2024), <https://www.osvnews.com/us-changes-to-religious-worker-visas-could-affect-priests-ministering-in-arkansas-other-dioceses/>; Wendy Strong, *Due to Green Card Backlog, Archdiocese of Milwaukee at Risk of Losing 24 Internationally-Born Priests*, SPECTRUM NEWS 1 (Nov. 14, 2024), <https://spectrumnews1.com/wi/milwaukee/news/2024/11/07/green-card-processing-backlog-archdiocese-of-milwaukee>; Lauren Anderson-Cripps, *Visa Backlog Imperils Immigrant Priests' Status*, THE LIVING CHURCH (Feb. 28, 2025), <https://livingchurch.org/news/news-episcopal-church/visa-backlog-imperils-immigrant-priests-status/>.

flexibility to religious workers that is already available to other employment-based immigrants for them to change jobs within their religious tradition while their adjustment of status is pending.

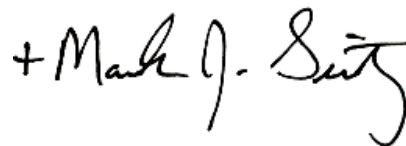
Beneficiaries of the Religious Worker Visa Program provide a range of services and play a pivotal role in advancing the religious exercise of everyday Americans. In the Catholic context, these workers include priests, men and women in religious orders and congregations, and other laypersons serving in a wide range of ministries. Some parishes, especially those in rural or isolated areas, would go without regular access to the sacraments, if not for these religious workers. Additionally, dioceses with large immigrant populations rely on foreign-born religious workers for their linguistic and cultural expertise. We would not be able to serve our diverse flocks, which reflect the rich tapestry of our society overall, without the faithful men and women who come to serve through the Religious Worker Visa Program. Simply put, an increasing number of American families will be unable to practice the basic tenets of their faith if this situation is not addressed soon. Likewise, hospitals will go without chaplains, schools will go without teachers, and seminaries will go without instructors.

We are deeply grateful to and commend the original cosponsors of this bill—Senator Susan Collins, Senator Tim Kaine, Senator James Risch, Representative Mike Carey, Representative Richard Neal, Representative Maria Salazar, and Representative Pete Stauber—for their steadfast leadership in addressing this nationwide challenge. We now ask for you to join them in supporting the RWPA and passing this much needed source of relief.

Respectfully,



Most Reverend Timothy P. Broglio
Archbishop for the Military Services, USA
President, USCCB



Most Reverend Mark J. Seitz
Bishop of El Paso
Chairman, USCCB Committee on Migration

June 23, 2025

Dear Representative/Senator:

As organizations representing a diverse range of faith traditions, we write to express our support for the bipartisan Religious Workforce Protection Act (RWPA) (S. 1298/H.R. 2672). Millions of Americans across our country rely on the essential contributions of foreign-born religious workers. Unless Congress acts, communities will increasingly be forced to part with the men and women who have faithfully served them for years, and religious exercise will be hindered in their absence.

Religious workers on an R-1 visa are limited to five years in the United States. Previously, the religious organizations sponsoring these workers could apply for them to receive permanent status within that timeframe. That is no longer possible. An expanded backlog in the employment-based, fourth preference (EB-4) visa category means a religious worker applying today will be forced to wait over 17 years for a green card. Meanwhile, current regulations require someone to be outside of the United States for at least one full year before possibly returning on a new R-1 visa. This poses tremendous hardship for religious organizations, our workers, and the families we serve, and it undermines the intent of Congress in creating the Religious Worker Visa Program.

The RWPA allows religious workers who are lawfully present in the country to request that the Department of Homeland Security extend their R-1 status until they can receive their green card, so long as (1) their employer has formally petitioned for their permanent status and (2) they are otherwise eligible to become lawful permanent residents. Those who were already forced to abandon their ministries prior to the RWPA's enactment would be granted a limited exemption from the one-year requirement. Finally, the bill puts religious workers on par with other employment-based immigrants in certain circumstances by allowing them to change positions within the same field without having to restart the permanent residency process from the beginning. This narrow measure is based on precedent in existing law and does not modify the underlying visas in any way.

Foreign-born religious workers make it possible for people to practice their faith in communities large and small across every state in the nation. Additionally, many of these workers serve people of other faiths or no faith at all through their roles in schools, hospitals, nursing homes, military settings, and more. Only Congress has the ability to ensure their contributions can continue without interruption.

We urge you to promote the free exercise of religion in our country for the benefit of all Americans by passing this critical source of relief into law.

Respectfully,

Agudath Israel of America
Bruderhof
Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA)
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
Conference of Major Superiors of Men
Disciples Home Missions
The Episcopal Church
Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Fellowship of Missions
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America
Hindu American Foundation (HAF)
Immigrant Hope
Leadership Conference of Women Religious
Missionary Gospel Fellowship
National Association of Evangelicals
National Latino Evangelical Coalition (NaLEC)
OneHope
Orthodox Church in America
The Salvation Army USA
Seventh-day Adventist Church North American Division
Southern Pacific District of the Assemblies of God
UMC General Board of Church and Society
Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America
Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice
U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops
U.S. Council of Muslim Organizations (USCMO)
World Relief

Religious Workforce Protection Act ([H.R. 2672](#) / [S.1298](#))

Original House Cosponsors: Rep. Mike Carey (R-OH-15); Rep. Richard Neal (D-MA-1);
Rep. Maria Salazar (R-FL-27); Rep. Pete Stauber (R-MN-8)

Original Senate Cosponsors: Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME); Sen. Tim Kaine (D-VA);
Sen. James Risch (R-ID)

Purpose

The Religious Workforce Protection Act (RWPA) would support the free exercise of religion in communities across America by providing limited flexibilities to religious workers who are legally present in the country and waiting to receive their green card.

Key Points

- Without this bill, foreign-born religious workers subject to a years-long backlog will increasingly be forced to abandon their ministries in the United States, depriving Americans of the essential services provided by their priests, pastors, rabbis, and others.
- This bill does not increase the number of people who can immigrate to the United States each year. Rather, it allows religious workers who are already in the country to continue serving their communities, uninterrupted, until they can receive permanent status.
- Only Congress is empowered to address this situation, given the statutory limitations involved, and this bill provides a very targeted, narrow source of relief based on existing law.

Overview

Religious workers on R-1 visas are limited to five years in the United States. In the past, this was not an issue because their employers could petition for them to receive permanent status within that timeframe. However, an expanded backlog in the EB-4 visa category has made that impossible: a religious worker applying today will be forced to wait well over a decade for permanent status in the United States. Further hardship is imposed on these workers, their employers, and the communities they serve by the fact that a religious worker must be outside of the United States for at least one full year between R-1 visas.

The RWPA addresses this situation in Section 2 of the bill by allowing the Secretary of Homeland Security to extend the R-1 status of religious workers until they can receive a green card, so long as (1) their employer has formally petitioned for their permanent status and (2) they are otherwise eligible to become lawful permanent residents. Section 3 of the bill also allows religious workers to change positions without having to restart the permanent residency process from the beginning if they continue working in the same field. Finally, Section 4 makes those already forced to depart the country prior to the RWPA's enactment eligible for relief under Section 2.