



**May 18, 2011**  
**Contact:** Michelle Mittelstadt  
202-266-1910  
Burke Speaker  
202-266-1920

## **Initiative That Helps Internationally Trained Health Professionals Join U.S. Health Care Field Earns National Prize for Exceptional Immigrant Integration Initiatives**

WASHINGTON – The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) on Wednesday announced that the Welcome Back Initiative is one of four recipients of its 2011 [E Pluribus Unum](#) Prizes for exceptional immigrant integration initiatives. The national award honors the Welcome Back Initiative, which is San Francisco-based and has affiliates in eight states, for its work with foreign-trained health care professionals living in the United States. WBI helps these skilled immigrants to obtain the professional licenses they need to join a U.S. health care sector experiencing worker shortages and increased demands as the nation’s population ages.

The Welcome Back Initiative and the other *E Pluribus Unum* Prizes winners will be honored tonight at a ceremony in Washington, D.C., featuring U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and other national policymakers. The national award is accompanied by a \$50,000 prize.

The *E Pluribus Unum* Prizes program, established in 2008 by MPI’s [National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy](#) with generous support from the [J.M. Kaplan Fund](#), seeks to encourage the adoption of effective integration practices and inspire others to take on the important work of integrating immigrants and their children so they can join the mainstream of U.S. society.

The Welcome Back Initiative provides orientation, links to education and language training offered elsewhere in the community, and support in securing appropriate U.S. licenses and credentials so that foreign-trained health professionals can re-start their careers in the U.S. health sector. The Welcome Back Centers leverage the training, experience and language skills of these underemployed migrant professionals, helping them to move from low-skill to high-demand jobs in the health care profession.

Welcome Back Centers are located in: Boston, Denver, New York, Providence (RI), San Antonio, San Diego, San Francisco, Seattle and suburban Washington, DC.

Since 2001, more than 11,000 health professionals have received services through the Welcome Back Initiative, with over 2,400 of them validating their credentials.

“The Welcome Back Initiative taps into an available supply of health care professionals in ways that can help relieve vacancies in high-demand health care occupations and improve health resources in medically underserved communities,” said Margie McHugh, co-director of MPI’s National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy. “The nimble Welcome Back Centers work tirelessly to prevent the talents of skilled immigrants from going to waste, allowing them to instead be used for the benefit of all Americans.”

The daunting tasks of transferring credentials obtained internationally and getting licensing in the United States – coupled with language barriers and confusion about the U.S. job search process – can prematurely end the careers of immigrants. The result is that career physicians and registered nurses often languish in jobs such as taxi drivers or other unskilled work as their high-demand occupations lay seemingly out of reach.

“The underemployment of foreign-trained health professionals is a loss not only to these individuals, but to the United States as a whole – especially in the face of many states facing serious shortages of health professionals, particularly in minority communities,” said José Ramón Fernández-Peña, founder and director of the Welcome Back Initiative, which began as a partnership between City College of San Francisco and San Francisco State University. “California, for example, has a population that is nearly one-third Latino, yet only 4 percent of the state’s doctors and nurses are Latinos. These shortages mean that providers many not be available in minority or immigrant communities who speak the residents’ language or understand their culture.”

While all of the centers offer orientation, counseling and support, each site tailors services offered to the area’s demands.

The other 2011 *E Pluribus Unum* Prize winners are: Hispanic Economic Development Corporation of Kansas City, the International Rescue Committee in San Diego and Project SHINE (Students Helping in the Naturalization of Elders) at Temple University. Marriott International received the first-ever *E Pluribus Unum* Corporate Leadership Award.

Winner highlights can be found at [www.integrationawards.org/winners-WelcomeBack.cfm](http://www.integrationawards.org/winners-WelcomeBack.cfm). For more information or to set up interviews with the winners or MPI experts, contact Michelle Mittelstadt at 202-266-1910, [mmittelstadt@migrationpolicy.org](mailto:mmittelstadt@migrationpolicy.org); or Burke Speaker, 202-266-1920, [bspeaker@migrationpolicy.org](mailto:bspeaker@migrationpolicy.org).

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The Migration Policy Institute is an independent, non-partisan think tank in Washington, D.C. dedicated to the study of the movement of people worldwide. MPI provides analysis, development and evaluation of migration and refugee policies at the local, national and international levels.

## **INFORMATION ABOUT INDIVIDUAL WELCOME BACK CENTERS:**

### **CALIFORNIA**

**San Francisco:** A project of San Francisco State University and City College of San Francisco, the Welcome Back Initiative’s lead site in San Francisco works with immigrant health care professionals and is home to the national initiative, which works with the individual Welcome Back Centers across the country, trains all centers’ staff, and conducts the initiative-wide evaluation.

[www.welcomebackinitiative.org/wb/](http://www.welcomebackinitiative.org/wb/)

**San Diego:** With educational partner Grossmont College, the San Diego Welcome Back Center works with foreign-trained health professionals such as doctors, nurses and dentists. It also provides aid to refugees who have been trained as engineers. [www.welcomebackcenter.org/](http://www.welcomebackcenter.org/)

*“The San Diego Welcome Back Center has been providing educational counseling, employment assistance and support to foreign-trained medical professionals since 2001. To date, we have aided over 3,300 physicians, nurses, dentists and other medical professionals, from 94 countries. The work of the San Diego WBC has never been more relevant and needed, as medical licensure has grown in complexity for the foreign trained, and as immigrants and refugees grow in numbers,” said Gail Patterson, project manager. “Moreover, as we go about our daily work, we understand that we address a critical need within California’s health care system, which is providing a linguistic and ethnic diverse population of health care workers.”*

## COLORADO

**Denver:** The Colorado Welcome Back Center, based at the Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning, provides services to Colorado’s internationally trained health workers, with a focus on those residing in the metropolitan Denver area. [www.coloradowelcomeback.org/](http://www.coloradowelcomeback.org/)

*“Colorado Welcome Back is an innovative way of addressing Colorado’s growing health workforce shortages while capitalizing on the talents and skills of internationally trained health care workers. We help foreign-trained doctors, nurses and other health care workers go through the education, culture and language training they need so they are able to provide the high-quality health care that is so essential to all Coloradans,” said Susan Downs-Karkos, director of the Colorado center.*

## MARYLAND

**Silver Spring:** The Suburban Maryland Welcome Back Center for Foreign Trained Health Professionals grew out of an initiative that the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services launched in 2006. It serves any internationally trained health professional currently living in Maryland. Partners include the Maryland Hospital Association; Washington Adventist, Holy Cross and Shady Grove hospitals; Montgomery College; the Montgomery County Department of Economic Development; and the Prince George’s County Economic Development Corporation. [www.lhiinfo.org/en-programs-and-activities/Welcome-Back-Center.asp](http://www.lhiinfo.org/en-programs-and-activities/Welcome-Back-Center.asp)

*“We are very honored to be one of the recipients of this prestigious award which recognizes the critical value and tremendous contributions of new immigrants to the overall community,” said Sonia Mora, director of the Maryland Welcome Back Center. “With the support of public and private-sector funders and partners, we are able to provide to participants guidance towards licensure, ESOL instruction, on-the-job paid internships and training, and leadership development. This allows high-caliber professionals from all over the world, including Latin America, Asia, Africa and Europe, to incorporate themselves into the health system and provide quality services not only to underserved communities, but to the community at large.”*

## MASSACHUSETTS

**Boston:** The Boston Welcome Back Center for Internationally Educated Nurses specializes in working with foreign-trained nurses, helping them achieve their registered nurse licensing in Massachusetts. The Center is a partnership of Bunker Hill Community College, Mass Bay Community College, Massachusetts Board of Higher Education, Roxbury Community College, and University of Massachusetts Boston. [www.bhcc.mass.edu/inside/18](http://www.bhcc.mass.edu/inside/18)

*“Participants entered the program making \$10 to \$12 an hour and at the completion of the program get a job with a base salary of \$50,000 to \$60,000 a year and the potential to earn as much as \$70,000 or \$80,000,” said Dr. Daniel Lam, executive director of the Boston Welcome Back Center. “Getting that license can be a life-changing experience.”*

## **NEW YORK**

**New York:** The New York City Welcome Back Center at LaGuardia Community College assists a variety of internationally trained health professionals who reside in the tri-state area, offering New York licensing guidance for nurses, physicians, psychologists, lab technicians, occupational therapists, dentists and pharmacists. The center also helps foreign health care professionals explore alternative careers in health care to pursue while on the path toward licensing.

[www.laguardia.edu/nycwbc/](http://www.laguardia.edu/nycwbc/)

*“Since the New York City Welcome Back Center formally launched in December 2010, the response has been tremendous and the wait list has already grown into the hundreds” said John Hunt, acting director of the center. “We had no doubt that there was a great unmet need in Queens for the services of the Welcome Back Center given that it is the county with the most foreign-born residents in all of the United States. A large number of the continuing education students we have always served at LaGuardia are highly skilled immigrants who wind up working in entry-level jobs, often outside of their fields of expertise. The Center provides them with the guidance they need to restart their health care careers in New York and contribute their expertise to the workforce.”*

## **RHODE ISLAND**

**Providence:** The Rhode Island Welcome Back Center at Dorcas Place focuses on working with foreign-trained physicians, nurses, social workers and physical therapists.

[www.ride.ri.gov/adulteducation/Rhode%20Island%20Welcome%20Back%20Center.aspx](http://www.ride.ri.gov/adulteducation/Rhode%20Island%20Welcome%20Back%20Center.aspx)

*“The Rhode Island Welcome Back Center is not only helping ease the labor shortage in the health care field, but is also bringing diversity to the workforce, so that it better reflects the population of our state,” said Manuela Raposo, director of the center.*

## **WASHINGTON STATE**

**Des Moines:** The Puget Sound Welcome Back Center, a project of Highline Community College, works with a wide swath of internationally trained health care professionals.

<https://welcomeback.highline.edu/>

*“The Puget Sound Welcome Back Center has served 475 participants since our opening in October of 2008. Of these, over 200 are nurses and over 100 are MDs. Our outcomes include over 50 validating their credentials, 27 passing licensing exams, 15 entering new careers in health care, 31 obtaining new employment in health care, 24 obtaining licenses in their previous profession and 4 MDs matched for residencies. Of those who obtained new employment in health care, their salaries increased by over 300 percent. The Puget Sound Welcome Back Center has made a significant impact in the community by improving immigrant integration, cultivating community partnerships, creating a culturally competent health care workforce, building workforce persistency rate, ensuring continued success on the job, saving costs of developing a multicultural and multilingual workforce and boosting local economic development,” said Kris Mason, director of the Puget Sound center.*

## **TEXAS**

**San Antonio:** The Alamo Area Welcome Back Center, based in the Westside Education and Training Center, is the result of a partnership of the Alamo Colleges: Northeast Lakeview College, Northwest Vista College, Palo Alto College, St. Philip's College and San Antonio College.

[www.alamo.edu/welcomeback/](http://www.alamo.edu/welcomeback/)

*“The Welcome Back Center has allowed the Alamo Colleges to more strategically address a very specific workforce development demand in the San Antonio area. Health is San Antonio’s largest economic growth cluster. By imbedding Welcome Back into a broader array of education and training services, the Alamo Colleges has been able to meet both the health care community’s need for biculturally competent workforce and the need for internationally trained health services workers to reenter the health sector,”* said Anson Green, director of the Alamo Area Welcome Back Center.

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