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Doctors join cry to protect doctors and patients

By Marshall Allen, Las Vegas Sun

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The state's two largest medical societies are pressing Gov. Jim Gibbons to launch investigations of Las Vegas-area doctors who, the Sun found, game the government by exploiting foreign doctors for their own benefit, at the expense of medically needy patients.

The investigation should be launched as quickly as possible "to preclude any future abuses of the program," Dr. Edwin Kingsley, president of the Nevada State Medical Association, and Dr. Weldon Havins, president of the Clark County Medical Society, wrote Friday.

Gibbons spokeswoman Melissa Subbotin said he would review the issue with legal counsel during the weekend to decide whether to forward the matter to Nevada Attorney General Catherine Cortez Masto.

The Sun reported Sept. 30 that multiple employers in Las Vegas — immigrant physicians themselves — have systematically abused the so-called J-1 program, which is designed to place foreign doctors in medically underserved areas — usually, clinics in rural or poor urban neighborhoods.

Instead, the bosses divert physicians to more affluent areas, where they can bring more money to the practice. In some cases, the employers violate contracts and federal law by failing to pay the foreign doctors their wages. Many of the foreign doctors also complain of being overworked to the point of exhaustion, jeopardizing patient care.

Federal and state oversight agencies fail to identify such abuses, the Sun investigation found, and the foreign doctors are afraid to complain for fear of being fired, losing their visas and being deported.

Kingsley and Havins, who represent about 1,500 Nevada doctors, said they are "deeply concerned" that foreign doctors may have been mistreated and that the abuses of the program could "shake public confidence."

The Sun investigation has triggered other calls for investigations and a review of federal guidelines.

Nevada State Health Division officials say they are pressing forward on their promise to better police the program. Unannounced visits to clinics to make sure J-1 doctors are working there will begin in the coming weeks, and inspectors say they want to interview the foreign doctors.

The Legislature's Committee on Health Care is to discuss the problem when it meets Oct. 31.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and Sen. Kent Conrad, D-North Dakota, who sponsored the legislation authorizing the J-1 program, have called for a federal investigation into the program. The matter has been sent to the Homeland Security Department, which oversees immigration. Chris Thorne, spokesman for Conrad, said that, because of the abuses, oversight and enforcement must become more aggressive.

The foreign doctors entered the United States on J-1 visas to serve their medical residency. The law allows a limited number of doctors to remain in the United States if they pledge to work for at least three years in underserved areas. Every two years Congress needs to reauthorize the program. The next time will be in June.

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