

# POLICY BRIEF

## **Universal licensure recognition can improve worker mobility, allow for greater access to services in Washington state**

By Elizabeth New,  
Director, Center for Health Care, Center for Worker Rights  
May 2026

### **Key Takeaways**

1. Licensing delays, even in areas as crucial as health care, keep qualified professionals from working and patients and consumers from accessing services.
2. Washington state has increasingly joined profession-specific licensing and mobility compacts. This piecemeal approach underscores both the need and desire for a unified alternative like universal licensure recognition (ULR).
3. Recent research from Archbridge Institute shows Washington state maintains a relatively high occupational licensing burden, ranking 11th nationally in a 2025 index, while earlier Institute for Justice research found the state licenses a large share of lower-income occupations — highlighting persistent barriers to workforce entry.
4. As of 2025, 28 states have passed universal licensing reforms — some better than others. There are clear models for the state.
5. ULR preserves safety authority. States still review discipline, require background checks and require applicants to demonstrate knowledge of state-specific laws where necessary. The reform removes redundant barriers, not safety protections.
6. Recent national research links universal recognition for physician licenses to improved access to care and lower cost barriers.
7. The Washington State Board of Nursing says the Nurse Licensure Compact “increases access to nursing care while maintaining public protection at the state level.”
8. Free-market mechanisms, employer reputation and civil liability already act as safeguards against bad actors in most professions.



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# Universal licensure recognition can improve worker mobility, allow for greater access to services in Washington state

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## Introduction

Washington state is experiencing occupational licensing bottlenecks and various workforce shortages, including in sectors as critical as health care. These barriers prevent qualified professionals already licensed in other states from working here, even as employers struggle to fill positions. New residents, including military spouses, are often unable to get to work because of unnecessary licensing requirements.

In response, the state has increasingly turned to interstate licensing compacts. While multistate agreements increase worker mobility in specific fields and are welcome, they are limited in scope, administratively fragmented and slow to expand.

For an example of compacts' slow implementation, look no further than the most recent compact adopted. The Washington state Legislature voted near-unanimously to pass House Bill 2088<sup>1</sup> in March 2026, allowing the state to become a member of the Dietitian Licensure Compact.<sup>2</sup> The compact is not yet operational nationally, however. That is expected to take one to two years. Even if it becomes operational sometime in 2027, Washington state's own law does not take effect until July 1, 2028. That means the state is on hold until 2028, at the least, before realizing any workforce benefit. The delay highlights a central weakness of compacts: They can improve mobility, but only through a slower, profession-by-profession process.

Universal licensure recognition (ULR) is a broader, more timely and more coherent approach. As of 2025, 28 states<sup>3</sup> have passed universal licensing reforms — some better than others — and there are clear legislative models for the state.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Washington State Legislature, *Final Bill Report SHB 2088* (accessed April 22, 2026), <https://lawfilesexternal.wa.gov/biennium/2025-26/Pdf/Bill%20Reports/House/2088-S%20HBR%20FBR%2026.pdf?q=20260422111316>.

2 The Council of State Governments, *Dietitian Licensure Compact* (accessed April 22, 2026), <https://dietitianscompact.org/>.

3 Noah Trudeau, Edward Timmons, and Benjamin Seevers, *State Occupational Licensing Index 2025* (Archbridge Institute, August 21, 2025), <https://www.archbridgeinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/2025-State-Occupational-Licensing-Index.pdf> and Knee Regulatory Research Center, *What regulations affect your job? Find out here!* (accessed April 22, 2026), <https://csorwvu.com/>.

4 Rachel Wallen Oglesby and Matthew Lobel, *State Approaches to Universal Licensing Recognition*, Issue Brief (Center for the American Worker, America First Policy Institute, October 9, 2023), [https://www.americafirstpolicy.com/assets/uploads/files/Issue\\_Brief\\_-\\_State\\_Approaches\\_to\\_Universal\\_Licensing\\_Recognition.pdf](https://www.americafirstpolicy.com/assets/uploads/files/Issue_Brief_-_State_Approaches_to_Universal_Licensing_Recognition.pdf).



the state licensed 76 of the 102 lower-income occupations studied.<sup>6</sup> The report, the third edition of License to Work, also notes that the average license for low- and moderate-income jobs in Washington state takes 171 days of education and experience. Required classes can be prohibitive and expensive.<sup>7</sup>

In August 2025, The Seattle Times reported that nearly 3,600 potential mental health professionals were waiting on review and approval of license applications they submitted to the state Department of Health, including professionals licensed in other states.<sup>8</sup> That was despite a mental health workforce shortage. The article titled, “Licensing delays keep social workers, counselors out of WA workforce,” reported that the state Health Care Authority said the state has just one provider for every 360 residents. It launched a campaign in 2021 to recruit people into the state’s behavioral health workforce. But when applicants apply for licenses, they are put in a holding pattern.

In addition to a love for licensing, Washington state also continues to add occupation-specific training mandates — showing that barriers to entry can extend beyond licensure alone. An example of how far workplace standards reach is the state’s required certification for animal massage therapists<sup>9</sup> and a 2025 law that requires formal textured-hair training for cosmetologists, barbers, estheticians and hair designers.<sup>10</sup>

Using a different list of occupations and measurement, the 2025 State Occupational Licensing Index compiled by the Archbridge Institute shows Washington state maintains a relatively high occupational licensing burden, ranking 11th nationally and second worst in the region behind Oregon.<sup>11</sup> The state received poor scores for having both barriers and a large number of licenses. A barrier exists when tasks associated with an occupational title are restricted. The occupation itself may not have a specific license, but it is a crime to perform the associated tasks without meeting entry requirements. The licensing measurement represents the

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6 Institute for Justice, *Ranking Burdens by State* (accessed April 22, 2026), <https://ij.org/report/license-to-work-3/report/results/ranking-burdens-by-state/>.

7 Lisa Knepper, Darwynn Deyo, Kyle Sweetland, Jason Tiezzi, and Alec Mena, *License to Work 3* (Institute for Justice, November 29, 2022), <https://ij.org/report/license-to-work-3/> and Institute for Justice, *Occupational Licensing in Washington* (accessed April 22, 2026), <https://ij.org/issues/economic-liberty/occupational-licensing/washington/>.

8 Hannah Furfaro, “Licensing Delays Keep Social Workers, Counselors Out of WA Workforce” (The Seattle Times, Aug. 17, 2025), <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/mental-health/licensing-delays-keep-social-workers-counselors-out-of-wa-workforce/>.

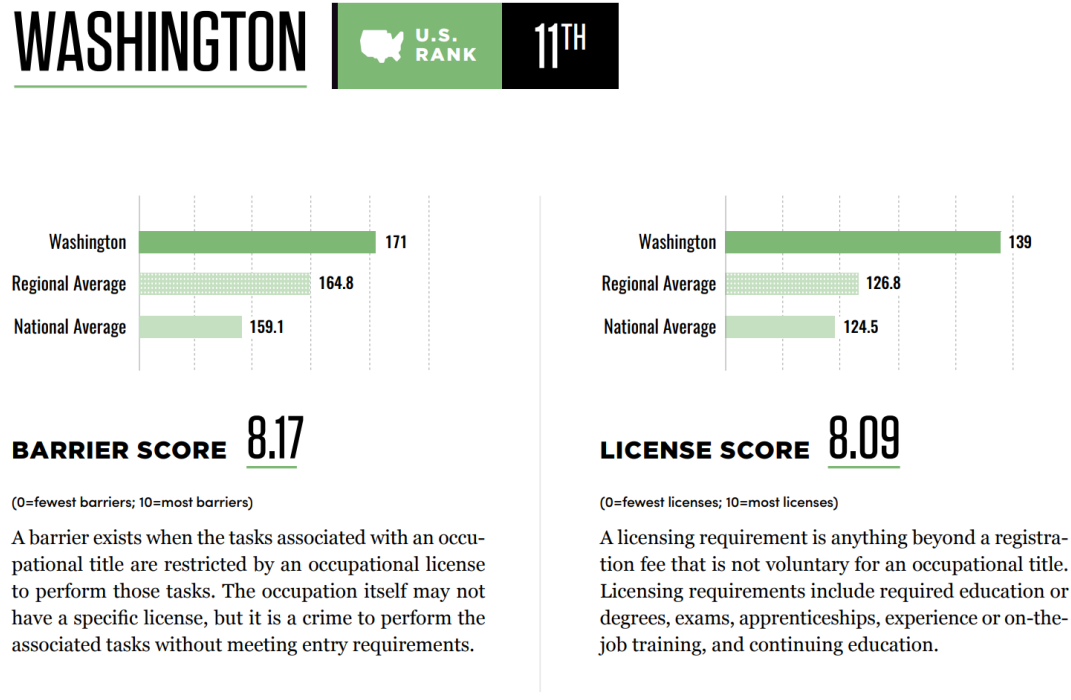
9 Revised Code of Washington, *Chapter 18.240 RCW — Animal Massage Therapists* (accessed April 22, 2026), <https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=18.240&full=true>.

10 Washington State Legislature, *HB 1874 — Requiring Training for Cosmetologists, Barbers, Estheticians and Hair Designers on the Care, Styling, and Treatment of Textured Hair* (May 2, 2025), <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=1874&Initiative=false&Year=2025>.

11 Noah Trudeau, Edward Timmons, and Benjamin Seevers, *State Occupational Licensing Index 2025, Washington state on Page 63* (Archbridge Institute, August 21, 2025), <https://www.archbridgeinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/2025-State-Occupational-Licensing-Index.pdf>.

number of licensing requirements a state has beyond a registration fee that is not voluntary for an occupational title.

Figure 2: Washington state is high in barriers and licensing



Source: State Occupational Licensing Index 2025, Archbridge Institute

## Policy Analysis

ULR has been adopted in dozens of states because it addresses a clear and persistent problem — qualified workers prevented from entering the workforce due to duplicative licensing requirements. Early evidence suggests these reforms can improve access to services without compromising public safety.

### *Evidence that letting professionals cross state lines works*

Recent research offers lawmakers evidence that reducing licensing barriers across state lines can improve access to services. A 2025 working paper from the National Bureau of Economic Research examined universal recognition for physician licenses and found measurable benefits after adoption.<sup>12</sup> Out-of-state practicing physicians per capita increased, the share of adults reporting access to a personal doctor rose by 6.0 percentage points and the share of working-age adults reporting medical cost barriers fell by 1.5 percentage points. Importantly, the study

12 Yun taek Oh and Morris M. Kleiner, *Does Universal Occupational Licensing Recognition Improve Patient Access? Evidence from Healthcare Utilization*, NBER Working Paper 34030 (National Bureau of Economic Research, July 2025, revised February 2026), [https://www.nber.org/system/files/working\\_papers/w34030/w34030.pdf](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w34030/w34030.pdf).

did not find significant interstate migration, suggesting that improved access came from increased cross-state practice rather than workforce displacement.<sup>13</sup>

Washington state's own nursing regulators have embraced the same core principle. The Washington State Board of Nursing says that the Nurse Licensure Compact the state joined in 2023, "increases access to nursing care while maintaining public protection at the state level."<sup>14</sup> While the compact is narrower than ULR, it reflects the same basic idea: Qualified professionals can cross state lines more easily without sacrificing state oversight.

States, including Washington, also loosened licensure barriers during the COVID-19 pandemic through compact use, temporary flexibilities and expedited multistate pathways, reinforcing the basic point that mobility can be expanded when policymakers decide access matters. Washington Medical Commission staff materials later said of the Interstate Medical Licensure Compact, "The compact has proven to be a great way to provide expedited licenses to physicians and was invaluable during the pandemic."<sup>15</sup>

These findings are especially relevant for Washington state, where shortages in health care and behavioral health have been well documented. They suggest that reducing unnecessary licensing friction can produce tangible improvements in access to care.

The Obama Administration issued a report that included a discussion of ways in which licensing regulations can harm, saying, "Licensing laws also lead to higher prices for goods and services, with research showing effects on prices of between 3 and 16 percent. Moreover, in a number of other studies, licensing did not increase the quality of goods and services, suggesting that consumers are sometimes paying higher prices without getting improved goods or services."<sup>16</sup>

The same report says, "Research shows that by imposing additional requirements on people seeking to enter licensed professions, licensing can reduce total employment in the licensed professions."<sup>17</sup>

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13 Yun-Taek Oh and Morris M. Kleiner, *The Digest: Universal Occupational Licensing Recognition and Healthcare Access* (National Bureau of Economic Research, October 1, 2025), <https://www.nber.org/digest/202510/universal-occupational-licensing-recognition-and-healthcare-access>.

14 Washington State Board of Nursing, *Nurse Licensure Compact Information* (accessed April 21, 2026), <https://nursing.wa.gov/msl>.

15 Washington Medical Commission, *Regular Meeting, July 13–14, 2023, 3rd Revised* (July 2023), <https://wmc.wa.gov/sites/default/files/WMC%20July%2013-14%2C%202023%20Mtg%20Pkt%203rd%20Rv.pdf>.

16 The White House, Department of the Treasury Office of Economic Policy, Council of Economic Advisers, and Department of Labor, *Occupational Licensing: A Framework for Policymakers* (July 2015), [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/licensing\\_report\\_final\\_nonembargo.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/licensing_report_final_nonembargo.pdf).

17 The White House, Department of the Treasury Office of Economic Policy, Council of Economic Advisers, and Department of Labor, *Occupational Licensing: A Framework for Policymakers* (July 2015), [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/licensing\\_report\\_final\\_nonembargo.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/licensing_report_final_nonembargo.pdf).

State lawmakers already recognize the workforce mobility problem and have repeatedly voted to join occupation-specific compacts and similar multistate licensure pathways across a growing list of health care, behavioral health, education, emergency services and personal-care professions.<sup>18</sup>

#### *How licensing works today — and how ULR would simplify licensure*

Under the current system, licensed professionals moving to Washington state are often required to apply for a new state license, even if they have years of experience and a clean record elsewhere. This process typically involves submitting a full application, verifying credentials with another state, meeting Washington-specific requirements and waiting for approval — sometimes for months.

The process treats experienced professionals as new applicants rather than proven practitioners.

Interstate compacts improve this process in certain professions for certain states. When both states participate in a compact, workers may be able to practice across state lines without obtaining a separate license. However, compacts apply only to specific occupations, require coordination across multiple states, and they often take years to implement and fully operationalize.

ULR simplifies this structure. Under ULR, a professional who is licensed and in good standing in another state can receive recognition in Washington state without repeating education, training or examinations — unless there is a clear reason to require additional steps. Instead of re-evaluating education and training from scratch, the state relies on the validity of an existing license and focuses its review on whether an applicant poses a public safety risk. In some licensure reform legislation, a year's experience in the licensee holder's profession is also required for eligibility.

The result is a system that is faster, more predictable and easier for both workers and regulators to navigate.

#### *Public safety is preserved*

A common concern is that ULR could weaken public protections. In practice, the policy removes redundant licensing barriers while preserving the state's ability to enforce safety standards.

Washington state would still be able to:

- review an applicant's disciplinary history.
- conduct background checks where required.
- deny applicants with revoked or restricted licenses.
- require knowledge of Washington-specific laws through jurisprudence exams.

ULR removes duplicative requirements, not safeguards. This structure mirrors existing approaches already accepted in Washington state. The Nurse Licensure

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18 Council of State Governments, *Washington* (accessed April 22, 2026), <https://compacts.csg.org/state/washington/>.

Compact, for example, allows multistate practice while maintaining state-level oversight and discipline. Universal recognition applies a similar principle more broadly, having a state trust valid licenses while still verifying safety.

Strong ULR legislation should prevent agencies from recreating the old system under a new name. Licensing boards already process applications, perform background checks where required and verify credentials. ULR narrows that work by directing agencies to verify license status, good standing, disciplinary history, required background checks and Washington-specific legal knowledge where necessary. It eliminates the need for boards to conduct a full second review of education, training and examinations already accepted by another state.

Washington state can screen applicants before recognition and deny those with encumbered licenses, lack of real-world experience, unresolved discipline, disqualifying background issues or credentials outside the same scope or practice level. ULR removes barriers, not safety checks. If another state's standards are demonstrably insufficient for a particular occupation, Washington state could preserve authority to require additional review or deny recognition for that license category.

Concerns about standards should be taken seriously, but lawmakers should also recognize that opposition to universal licensing can be about protecting incumbents from competition. Opposition also often stems from an unexamined belief that Washington state standards are superior to those of other states. A well-designed ULR law can preserve public safety while preventing licensing from being used to keep qualified out-of-state workers off the field.<sup>19</sup>

### *Time is saved*

Even though licensing boards would continue issuing credentials, collecting reasonable processing fees and verifying applicants, ULR significantly reduces the burden on workers and agencies by narrowing the review to what matters most.

Without ULR, professionals may be required to repeat coursework, training or examinations despite years of safe practice. This can be costly and time-consuming. ULR generally prevents agencies from imposing those requirements unless there is a clear deficiency or public safety reason.

Reducing credential review speeds up processing. Current systems often rely on case-by-case equivalency reviews, which can require boards to compare training hours, coursework and examination requirements across states. ULR establishes a clearer standard: If an applicant is licensed, experienced and in good standing, recognition can proceed more quickly. Licensing boards no longer need to compare minor differences in coursework or training hours. Instead, they focus on whether an applicant is safe and qualified to practice.

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19 Morris M. Kleiner, *Reforming Occupational Licensing Policies* (The Hamilton Project, Brookings Institution, March 2015), Page 24, [https://www.hamiltonproject.org/assets/legacy/files/downloads\\_and\\_links/reforming\\_occupational\\_licensing\\_morris\\_kleiner\\_final.pdf](https://www.hamiltonproject.org/assets/legacy/files/downloads_and_links/reforming_occupational_licensing_morris_kleiner_final.pdf).

ULR allows the state to maintain authority while bringing administrative efficiency. ULR does not eliminate oversight — it directs it toward meaningful risks rather than paperwork.

### *Summary of ULR's benefit*

Washington state's current approach demonstrates a clear recognition of the problem but relies on a fragmented solution. Compacts improve mobility in individual professions, but they do so slowly and unevenly. Workers in non-compact professions remain subject to delays and duplicative requirements, even when they are fully qualified.

ULR would allow the state to address workforce mobility with a single, consistent, more efficient framework. For employers, that means faster hiring and a broader labor pool. For workers, it means fewer barriers to entering the workforce. For consumers, it means improved access to services.

The policy does not replace existing licensing structures, nor does it eliminate professional standards. Instead, it modernizes how Washington state recognizes qualified professionals in an increasingly mobile workforce.

## **Policy recommendation**

Washington state should adopt ULR for licensed professionals who are already credentialed and in good standing in another state.

Right now, the state often treats experienced, licensed professionals like first-time applicants. ULR would reverse that default. Instead of forcing workers to restart their careers through duplicative applications, training reviews and delays, the state would recognize an existing out-of-state credential unless there is a clear public safety reason not to do so. The goal is to stop making qualified workers jump through unnecessary hoops while preserving the state's ability to block bad actors.

The state Legislature's wide, bipartisan support for profession-specific compacts indicates that improving interstate worker mobility is no longer controversial in principle, despite concerns about protecting the jobs of in-state workers and limiting outside competition. Experience with compacts has also shown that mobility and public protection can coexist. ULR would provide a broader and more coherent framework than continuing with more compacts.

Strong models for a ULR law already exist. Research and policy guidance from the Knee Center for the Study of Occupational Regulation at West Virginia University identifies common elements of effective and evolving ULR laws.<sup>20</sup> The Institute for Justice provides easy-to-use model legislation for states.<sup>21</sup> The Goldwater

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20 Knee Center for the Study of Occupational Regulation, *2024 Update to the Survey of Universal Licensing Reforms in the United States* (July 2024), <https://knee.wvu.edu/publications/knee-center-research/2024/07/03/policy-brief-2024-update-to-the-survey-of-universal-licensing-reforms-in-the-united-states>;

21 Institute for Justice, *Universal Recognition of Occupational Licenses Act* (June 24, 2022), <https://ij.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Universal-Recognition-of-Occupational-Licenses-Act.pdf>.

Institute offers practical bill language and discusses the experience from Arizona's first-in-the-nation statute.<sup>22</sup>

Some models also recognize work experience or private certification when a worker comes from a state that does not license an occupation that another state does. Licensing standards vary widely across states, and many occupations are not licensed everywhere, which is why universal recognition should include pathways for workers whose prior state did not license their occupation. Washington state could consider that approach later for low-risk occupations, but the first priority should be a clear ULR pathway for applicants who already hold a government-issued license in good standing from another state.<sup>23</sup>

### *Transition and implementation*

Washington state can adopt ULR without creating unnecessary disruption. A staged approach would allow the state to modernize its licensing system while coordinating with existing compact obligations.

The state should first enact a general ULR statute based on successful state models. That legislation should apply across licensed occupations unless a specific exception is required by federal law or by a demonstrated public safety concern. It should also include clear guardrails on eligibility, safety review, compact coordination and fees.

Second, the state should include clear coordination language addressing how ULR would interact with existing interstate compacts. The best approach is not to exempt compact professions from ULR entirely. Instead, Washington state should allow applicants in compact-covered professions to seek licensure through ULR while preserving the separate compact pathway for multistate practice where available. That would avoid forcing workers into a slower or narrower system simply because their profession happens to have a compact. States such as Idaho have clarified that workers in compact-covered professions may still seek licensure through ULR rather than being forced into the compact pathway.<sup>24</sup>

Third, the Legislature should direct relevant agencies to review and update existing rules to ensure they align with a ULR framework. Without this step, outdated equivalency requirements and processing practices could continue to create delays even after reform. The review should prioritize professions facing shortages or known licensing backlogs.

Fourth, the state should require a one-time implementation review after five years. Agencies should rely on data already collected during licensing review,

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22 Arizona Revised Statutes, § 32-4302 (accessed April 23, 2026), <https://www.azleg.gov/ars/32/04302.htm>; Goldwater Institute, *Breaking Down Barriers to Work with Universal Recognition* (accessed April 23, 2026), <https://www.goldwaterinstitute.org/universalrecognition/>.

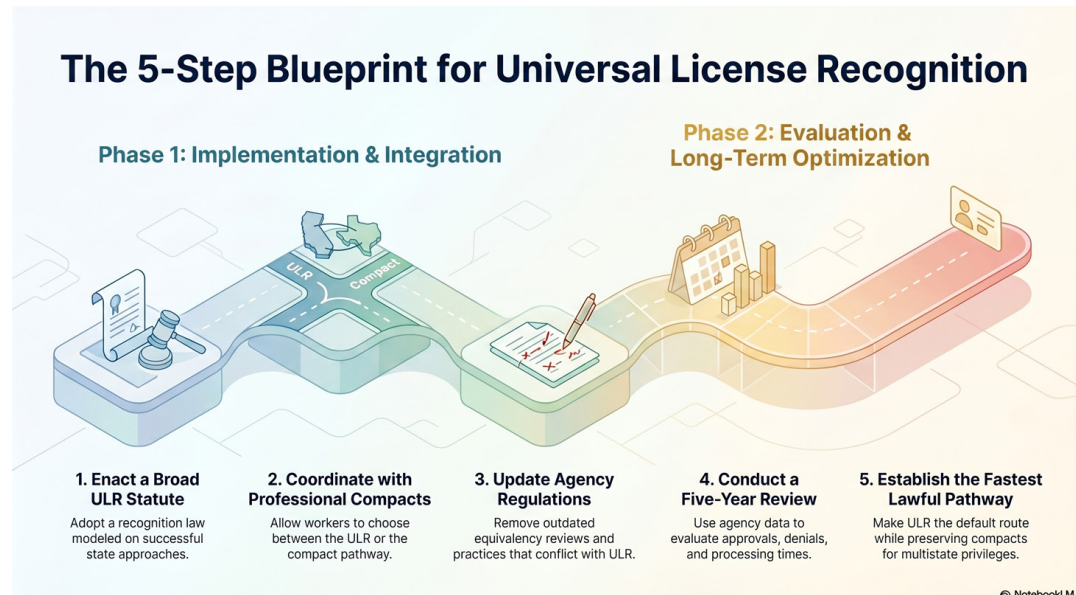
23 Goldwater Institute, *Universal Recognition: Frequently Asked Questions* (updated October 2021), [https://www.goldwaterinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Recognizing-Out-of-State-Licenses\\_FAQ\\_2021\\_10\\_28.pdf](https://www.goldwaterinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Recognizing-Out-of-State-Licenses_FAQ_2021_10_28.pdf).

24 Idaho Code, § 67-9409(7) (2025), <https://law.justia.com/codes/idaho/title-67/chapter-94/section-67-9409/>.

including applications received, approvals and denials, average processing times and common reasons for denial. This would give lawmakers enough time to evaluate whether ULR is reducing delays without creating an ongoing reporting burden.

Finally, the Legislature should direct agencies to coordinate ULR with existing compacts so workers can use the most efficient lawful pathway. ULR should serve as the default in-state recognition route, while compacts remain available for multistate privileges where ULR does not exist. This would allow the two systems to coexist without forcing qualified workers through a slower or narrower process.

**Figure 3: Implementation path for universal licensure recognition**



### *Model legislation must-haves*

At a minimum, Washington state’s ULR legislation should require that an applicant:

- hold a current and valid license in another state in the same profession and practice level;
- have held that license for a defined minimum period, such as one year;
- be in good standing;
- have no unresolved disciplinary action or complaint;
- satisfy any background check requirement that otherwise applies under state law; and
- demonstrate knowledge of Washington-specific law where necessary.

The law should also make clear that Washington state may deny recognition when an applicant presents a public safety concern, but it may not require duplicative education, training or examinations absent a specific and documented deficiency.

Duplicative fees for universal recognition applicants should be limited. A worker who moves frequently should not be forced to pay full relicensing costs in every state after already proving competence elsewhere. The state should cap ULR fees at the actual administrative cost of verifying good standing, discipline history and

Washington-specific requirements. It should consider waiving or reducing fees for military spouses. It should consider payment delay for workers who don't yet have employment in the state.

In short, Washington state does not need to choose between mobility and safety. It can preserve meaningful oversight while making it easier for qualified people to get to work. ULR offers the state a simpler, broader and more durable solution than continuing to build occupational mobility one compact at a time.

## **Conclusion**

The Washington state Legislature has already recognized the workforce mobility problem. Lawmakers have repeatedly joined profession-specific compacts to help qualified workers move across state lines and get to work more quickly. That direction is welcome, and it has drawn bipartisan support. But the state's current approach remains piecemeal, slow to implement and limited to one profession at a time.

ULR offers a better solution. It would allow the state to join dozens of others in recognizing qualified out-of-state professionals across occupations, while preserving the state's authority to review discipline, conduct background checks and require knowledge of Washington-specific law where necessary. It does not eliminate standards. It simplifies them.

Washington state can continue adding compact after compact, each with its own statute, rules and administration, or it can adopt a single framework that is faster, simpler and more responsive to real workforce needs. With strong models already in place in other states, practical guidance available from the Knee Center and the Institute for Justice, and growing evidence that recognition reforms can improve access to services, lawmakers here have reason and ease to act.

ULR would make it easier for qualified workers to get to work, easier for employers to fill needed positions, and easier for Washingtonians to access care and services. It is time to move from a patchwork system to a more coherent one.

## **Published by Washington Policy Center**

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Elizabeth New grew up in Seattle's Ballard neighborhood and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in journalism and political science from Western Washington University. That's where her newspaper career began, writing political opinion columns for The Bellingham Herald.

After graduation, Elizabeth became the communications director for the Washington Family Council, crafting legislative testimony, press releases and articles on various state policies. She was recruited away by The Columbian newspaper in Southwest Washington, serving a decade as an editorial board member and columnist, winning several Society of Professional Journalists awards. Elizabeth enjoyed another 10 years as a political columnist for The Oregonian.

A firm believer in free-market principles as the best path to prosperity and individual opportunity, Elizabeth has built her career advocating for policies that promote economic freedom and limited government. She also has experience as an adjunct professor at Washington State University Vancouver.

Her volunteer work has included prison outreach, public school involvement, writing for her neighborhood association and participating in community cleanups. She lives in Vancouver, Washington.