



## **Voices: Afraid to apply for health care for their kids**

By Alan Gomez  
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MIAMI — For Esperanza Cuevas, the phone call has become disturbingly common.

Undocumented immigrants balk at registering their U.S.-born children under the Affordable Care Act, because they fear furnishing the information will lead to their deportation.

Last month, Cuevas let ACA navigators use her Miami mattress store to explain the situation to people in the predominantly Hispanic neighborhood. Undocumented immigrants cannot participate in the new health care program, but they have to provide their information if they want to register their U.S.-born children, who qualify because they are U.S. citizens.

The Nicaragua native continues getting calls from undocumented immigrants who have spent their lives hiding and are being asked to input all their personal information into a government website.

"They want to apply for their children, of course, but they're scared," says Cuevas, 58. "I'm a mother, I'm a grandmother, and that breaks my heart."

The concern has become so widespread that President Obama tried to reassure undocumented immigrants during an interview with Univision on March 6.

"None of the information that is provided in order for you to obtain health insurance is in any way transferred to immigration services," Obama said.

As the March 31 deadline looms, time is running out for people to enroll in the health care marketplace. That deadline looms larger for households that include undocumented immigrants, since their information generally takes longer to check out.

Jenny Rejeske, health policy analyst at the National Immigration Law Center, which advocates for immigrants, says the ACA website was set up to quickly verify each person's identity via electronic records. Since most undocumented immigrants don't have such records, confirming

their identities usually requires scanning and uploading documents or mailing more information, a process that can take days or weeks.

"We're really getting down to the wire now for people who need to mail in documents," she says.

The problem is not a new one for immigrants, who historically have lower rates of participation in government programs, in part because they fear they might flag a relative who is in the country illegally. According to [a report from the Cato Institute](#), about 28% of low-income Americans remain uninsured, compared with 59% of non-citizens, many of whom qualify for Medicaid and other health care programs.

It's impossible to know how many parents have steered clear of ACA because of their undocumented status. But [4.5 million U.S. citizens](#) have at least one undocumented parent, and 9 million undocumented immigrants live in mixed-status families, so the number could be high.

Despite the reassurance from the president, the calls still come in to Cuevas and others who have been helping Hispanics and other immigrant groups sign up for health care. Organizations around the country are conducting workshops and going door-to-door to explain the process and assuage the fears.

"Being in this grand country and their children can't get health care because of a lack of understanding?" Cuevas says. "That hurts."

*Alan Gomez is a Miami-based correspondent for USA TODAY.*