



Trump immigrant ‘public charge’ rule makes no sense [Editorial]

Editorial Board

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When word first leaked that the Trump administration planned to make it harder for legal immigrants to earn permanent residency, fear and confusion swept through newcomer communities. Even though it hasn't taken effect yet, thanks to court challenges, the change nevertheless has alarmed both legal immigrants already here and aid groups working to help those seeking to come in the future.

The proposal will work against legal immigrants in two ways: It adds non-cash benefits, like healthcare, housing or food stamps, to the kinds of government help that can disqualify a legal resident from permanent status, and it will allow the government to deny new applicants for entrance into America based on an expectation — a kind of guess, really — that they'd likely use public benefits in the future.

It also would favor new immigrants who can show they have income or assets higher than 250 percent of the federal poverty threshold, or \$64,375 for a family of four — twice the level currently required under a 1996 law for people sponsoring immigrants.

These changes would do more than add hoops for immigrants, especially poor ones, to find a lasting and legal footing in the U.S. They ignore the economic reality that legal immigrants — no matter how poor they begin their lives in America — strengthen the U.S. economy, often to extraordinary degrees. Proof of that abounds in the city of Houston. The new rules should be rescinded before going into effect as scheduled on Feb. 24.

Already, the mere prospect of the rule change appears to be affecting immigrants and their children. Patients at medical clinics worried that getting needed health care could negatively impact their legal status. At community meetings in Houston, advocates reported seeing parents too frightened to apply for food stamps for U.S. citizen children and pregnant women who skipped prenatal appointments. Even if the new rule does not apply to children who are citizens, it seems to be having a chilling effect on services they should not skip.

In the two years since Trump first proposed the changes, the number of Texas children enrolled in public health insurance programs has dropped by more than 230,000 — a decrease advocates attribute to the anxiety gripping immigrant families.

The changes will likely be implemented soon. Last week, the U.S. Supreme Court voted 5-4 to give the administration the green light to start enforcing the revised “public charge” rule.

The new policy creates “an invisible wall,” Melissa McChesney, a senior policy analyst with the Center for Public Policy Priorities told the Editorial Board. “It’s an unprecedented departure from how current immigration policies and practices work.”

It also appears targeted — indirectly, at least — toward would-be immigrants with black or brown skin. It gives a preference to wealthy applicants and virtually shuts the door on low-income people from around the world including Mexico and Central America.

Not only is the revised policy morally suspect — it’s weighted against the very immigrants traditionally welcomed by our country, the tired, the poor, the newcomers yearning to breathe free — but it makes no economic sense. Far from being a burden on society, immigrants use public benefits at lower rates than native-born.

According to the Cato Institute, “when low-income noncitizens receive public benefits, the average value of benefits per recipient is almost always lower than for those who are native-born.”

Rather than draining public coffers, immigrants boost our economy and contribute more in tax revenue than they use in public benefits. Foreign-born adults participate in the workforce at a higher rate than the native born and make up more than a third of the workforce in some industries, including farming, fishing, maintenance workers and building and grounds cleaning. About 1 in 5 home health care industry workers, a workforce we will depend on even more in the coming years as the U.S. population ages, are also immigrants.

The public charge rule may yet be halted. The Supreme Court decision lifted preliminary injunctions blocking the policy from being enforced, but didn’t rule on its merits. The administration has appealed rulings in three states blocking the changes. Decisions are expected this year.

We hope those challenges prevail. The Trump administration policy punishes immigrants who have lawfully sought a place in this country. It attempts an end run around Congress to enact a biased and harmful immigration policy.

It will turn away the people who have, for generations, enriched our economy and our nation — and that will hurt us all.