

# Portland Press Herald

## Commentary: ‘Public charge’ rule on immigrants would be economic blunder

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When my family arrived in Portland in May 2011, fleeing death threats in our native Rwanda, we had next to nothing. Back home, I was a professional with a bachelor’s degree; here, it took time for my family to acclimate to our new city and find our footing. During that period, we were lucky to receive public assistance benefits to help subsidize our rent, health insurance and groceries. We did not want to take anything from the country that had welcomed us so generously, and we were determined to prove ourselves.

Within a short time, I’d secured a job helping Portland’s mentally ill homeless population secure treatment and housing and received my master’s degree in clinical mental health counseling from Southern New Hampshire University. Once my wife, who’d been a nurse back in Rwanda, got her work permit, she started working as a caregiver for Maine’s elderly population. And today, two of our four children have graduated from high school and are full-time students at the University of Southern Maine.

This is the path that so many immigrants take. We come here with very little but work tirelessly until we can stand on our feet. Which is why I was so dismayed to learn about the Trump administration’s “public charge” proposal. Under the new rule, most immigrants who use more than 15 percent of the poverty line in public benefits – just \$2.50 per person daily for a family of four, according to New American Economy – would be disqualified from gaining permanent residency here. If implemented, the rule could lead to the deportation of millions of people in industries from transportation to education and cost the U.S. economy up to \$164.4 billion.

In Maine, the new public charge rule could have a serious impact on the state’s health care industry – one of the fields most likely to be affected. Seventeen percent of our doctors and 13 percent of our psychiatrists were educated abroad. Roughly 7 percent of registered nurses here are foreign born. If these percentages sound small, consider that our state is facing a severe shortage of health care workers, with 25 open jobs for every one unemployed worker. Given that one in every five Maine residents is elderly, we cannot afford to lose a single doctor, nurse or health aide.

Without access to public benefits, I wouldn’t be working in the health care industry today. In addition to my job as a multicultural caseworker at Preble Street Resource Center, I started my own health care company. In April, I launched OneLove HomeCare to provide assisted living services and drug addiction treatment to Mainers with long-term disabilities. Starting in December, we plan to hire five full-time and two part-time employees. Finally, the same month I launched my company, I was sworn in as a U.S. citizen.

My position is unique because the public charge rule would not apply to asylum holders. And yet the path that I have taken in this country is no different than millions of other immigrants who came here with very little and, with some public assistance, managed to accomplish greatness, not just for themselves but for their communities. The Trump administration claims that people like me will become wards of the state; the evidence suggests otherwise. More than 91 percent of noncitizens affected by the rule change are currently employed and earning a collective \$96.4 billion in annual income. Yet this rule would likely apply to individuals who are 95 percent self-sufficient, according to the conservative-leaning Cato Institute. It could apply to immigrants with a mortgage or those who have a child with a chronic illness. It could gut the workforce in vital industries.

When I first arrived in the country, I felt like the whole world was on my shoulders. But getting access to those benefits gave me hope that I could start over and live a life without fear. Don't let the government take that hope away from immigrants – those who are already here and those who are eager to seize the American Dream. The country needs them. Maine does, too.