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## Trump Administration's Latest Attack on Immigrants: 'Starve Them Out'

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Earlier this month, ProPublica reported that agencies in at least 18 states say they've seen drops of up to 20 percent in enrollment in WIC, a federal nutrition program aimed at pregnant women that enables immigrant families to access infant formula and healthy food for their families.

In a move long-anticipated by immigrant communities and advocates, the Trump administration proposed new regulations on Saturday that could deny green cards to immigrants who have accessed public benefits for their children, including food, housing, and medical care.

"Those seeking to immigrate to the United States must show they can support themselves financially," Department Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen said in a statement, adding that the new rule would "promote immigrant self-sufficiency and protect finite resources by ensuring that they are not likely to become burdens on American taxpayers."

Specifically, the Trump administration is seeking changes to what is known as the "public charge" rule, an already troubling and deeply racist portion of U.S. immigration law originally dating back to 1882 that enables the country to deny immigrants admission based on certain criteria, primarily their likelihood of becoming a "public charge," defined as "a person who receives certain public benefits above certain defined threshold amounts or for longer than certain periods of time." This is considered along with an immigrant's age, health, family status, assets, resources, financial status, education, and skills, according to DHS.

The proposed rule change could bar those seeking to immigrate to the United States from being able to enter, and deny lawful permanent residents the ability to further adjust their status and naturalize, simply for accessing services for their families to which they are legally entitled.

"The Trump administration is doing things we once thought were unimaginable, including proposing [this rule] that would harm the most vulnerable and marginalized children in need and people with disabilities," said Jess Morales Rocketto, political director at the National Domestic Workers Alliance and the chair of the We Belong Together campaign.

A draft of the Trump administration's proposed changes to the public charge rule first leaked in February, and in the months since, both documented and undocumented low-income immigrants

have reportedly been unenrolling from programs that enable them to feed their children. Earlier this month, *Politico* reported that agencies in at least 18 states say they've seen drops of up to 20 percent in enrollment in WIC, a federal nutrition program aimed at pregnant women that enables families to access infant formula and healthy food.

"I do truly think [the Trump administration's] goal is to make it impossible for immigrants to come here," said Rocketto. "We've seen this through all of their threats, from getting rid of the diversity lottery to trying to end family migration. With the public charge, it's a clear they're trying to make it impossible for immigrants to stay here. The administration is willing to literally starve them out, and then make it impossible for them to come back or have their families migrate here."

The proposed rule changes could affect about 382,000 people a year, leading to a public health catastrophe that could have a chilling effect in immigrant communities, deterring them from accessing much-needed services to which they are legally entitled and for which they pay taxes. Research in the *New England Journal of Medicine* this month found that the rule changes would reduce enrollment in essential public benefits that affect health, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The journal cites May research from the Cato Institute, which found an estimated 15 percent of noncitizen adults, 20 percent of noncitizen children, and 25 percent of U.S.-born children with noncitizen parents receive SNAP benefits. "A 28 percent decline in SNAP use for each of these populations—again, such disenrollment occurred after the 1996 welfare-reform law—would mean that more than 1 million people would lose food assistance and become food insecure," the *New England Journal of Medicine* article says.

The Trump administration's proposed regulations could force millions of poor immigrants who rely on public assistance "to make a difficult choice between accepting financial help and seeking a green card to live and work legally in the United States," the *New York Times* reported. This includes older immigrants who get low-cost prescription drugs through the Medicare Part D program. Many will be "forced to stop participating in the popular benefits program or risk being deemed a 'public charge' who is ineligible for legal resident status," according to the *Times*.

It will also cause mistrust, increased fear, and avoidance of government officials, according to the *New England Journal of Medicine* article. While several categories of immigrants are exempt from the public-charge rule—including refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants with Temporary Protected Status (TPS)—confusion regarding applicability could deter even exempted groups from applying for benefits that would enable them to feed their children.

Back in March, "Jessica" (a pseudonym), a 40-year-old TPS recipient from El Salvador, told *Rewire*. *News* she was in a constant state of fear regarding her ability to remain in the United States with her children. At the time, she'd been living and working here for 17 years, maintaining two jobs, one of which was at a hotel where she was represented by a union. She is the mother of six children, four of whom are U.S. citizens and two of whom are Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) recipients. She is also raising her nephew, who migrated to the United States after being threatened by gangs in El Salvador. Two months prior to speaking

with *Rewire.News*, DHS terminated TPS for El Salvador and Jessica grew concerned for her future, especially as changes to the public charge had been publicly leaked.

“This is all very hard for me, and very sad. I don’t know what my family will do. When I first started working at the hotel, I applied for food assistance and was given \$10 a month. What will that mean for my status? I’ve applied for other help, but they’ve never given it to me. That’s why I’ve always had two jobs, to provide for my family. I thank God that my daughter, who has Type I Diabetes, is an American citizen who can access medial care. If she were not a citizen, who knows if she would be able to?” Jessica said.

Advocacy groups have warned of the public charge rule changes for months, including the Center for American Progress (CAP). In the weeks after the proposed changes to the public charge rule were first leaked, CAP senior fellow, Shawn Fremstad, told *Rewire.News* that the most important thing for the U.S. public to understand is that the proposed rule changes were “very intentionally designed to create harm.”

“This is not about increasing social integration or improving health outcomes for U.S. citizen children. This was designed to get to immigrant parents and to keep immigrants from certain places out [of the country]. It’s like building another wall almost, one between immigrant communities and their health and well-being,” Fremstad said.

Advocacy groups have argued this latest move is part of the Trump administration’s attempt at ending what it has called “chain migration.” As *Rewire.News* reported, President Donald Trump released a series of “immigration principles and policies” in October 2017, largely based on the priorities of anti-immigrant organizations; one of these priorities was implementing a “merit-based immigration system” in an effort to end so-called chain migration. Trump’s repeated use of the now-popular phrase “chain migration,” which also appeared in his immigration framework, has deep roots among anti-immigrant hate groups.

“The United States already has a caste system for immigrants,” said Fremstad, and the public charge rule change “will reinforce it and deepen it.”

The Trump administration’s proposed rule changes do not need to be approved by Congress. Rather, the rule changes will face a 60-day public review once published in the Federal Register, according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

Jessica said that in times like these, immigrant communities need to band together and fight.

“We have to be strong and demand more for our families,” she said. “President Trump has shown nothing but hate for our communities. Believe it or not, I pray for him. I pray he opens his mind and heart and that he educates himself on our realities. The way I see it is that he has been raised in a golden crib, but he didn’t get the most important thing that people need: love. He has been raised in hate, so now he will take what we need—food [and] our health—because he never learned to respect human life. But we will fight this.”