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Oregon Health Authority encourages immigrants to find attorneys for new 'public charge' rule

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The Oregon Health Authority is encouraging immigrants with questions about a new public benefit rule to find an attorney.

The Trump administration's rule is expected to make it harder for immigrants who use government benefits to obtain legal residency.

But the Oregon Health Authority says it stigmatizes Medicaid and other public assistance programs.

The agency wrote to the federal government last year saying health care is not a cash-assistance benefit.

“Good health is the foundation for thriving, economically independent people, families and communities,” the agency wrote in its comments. “This proposal punishes immigrants for taking responsibility for their health, the health of their loved ones and their neighbors by seeking health care. It fails to acknowledge that in a growing majority of states (like Oregon), which have expanded Medicaid, a high percentage of Medicaid members work, earn income and support themselves without public assistance.”

Oregon Health Authority spokeswoman Delia Hernandez said the agency is letting immigrants know many programs aren't included in the federal rule, including Medicaid for children under 21 and pregnant women, CHIP (the Children's Health Insurance Program) and WIC (the Women, Infants and Children supplemental nutrition program).

“We really want folks to know what programs are not impacted by this,” Hernandez said.

Ken Cuccinelli, the acting director of the U.S. Immigration Service, announced the rule, saying it should save the government money by prioritizing immigrants who won't be reliant on the welfare system.

The Cato Institute finds immigrants are less likely to use welfare benefits than native-born Americans.