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Immigrants and automatic enrollment in telephone Lifeline programs

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ESTABLISHING TELECOMMUNICATIONS LIFELINE ELIGIBILITY: THE USE OF PUBLIC BENEFIT PROGRAMS AND ITS IMPACT ON LAWFUL IMMIGRANTS

One mechanism increasingly relied on today to enroll low-income households in multiple public assistance programs, while avoiding the need for multiple application processes, involves the use of participation in one program to establish eligibility for another.

An *exclusive* reliance on participation in public benefit programs as a means to establish eligibility for low-income telephone Lifeline assistance programs, however, without providing an additional alternative entrée to Lifeline benefits based on a determination of income, may systematically exclude lawful immigrants from program participation.

The exclusion will first occur because of “public charge” concerns that prevent many immigrant families from applying for public assistance for which they are eligible. The exclusion will also occur because of statutory limitations that have been placed on the right of legal immigrants to participate in either federal or state public assistance programs.

PUBLIC CHARGE LIMITATIONS

The “public charge” concerns of legal immigrants stem from aspects of federal law that may disallow a resident from gaining status as a “legal permanent resident” (LPR) if certain financial conditions are met. A determination that an immigrant is likely to become “primarily dependent on the government for subsistence” can have “serious immigration consequences.” (Fremstad, 2000) While LPRs are not generally

subject to the public charge test, it is “aliens who are seeking to become LPRs (through a visa application or an application for admission or adjustment in status) who have to convince an INS or consular officer that they are not likely to become a public charge.

The application of public charge requirements today results in very few adverse actions taken against immigrants in the United States. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, new “guidance” from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) “very narrowly limits the situations in which receipt of public benefits is relevant to a ‘public charge’ finding.” CBPP states that the “vast majority of immigrants who have already entered the United States --especially immigrants who are legal permanent residents-- will never be subject to a public charge determination.”

Despite this current state of the law, the *practical* effect of public charge laws and regulations is to serve as a chilling mechanism for immigrant participation in public assistance programs. Little question exists but that “many legal immigrants *fear* that if they receive various public benefits, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) or State Department will decide they are likely to become a public charge. . .Recent research suggests that public charge concerns, along with the ‘chilling effects’ related to welfare reform and confusion about eligibility rules for benefits, have kept many legal immigrants from accessing benefits for which they are eligible.” (Fix and Passel, 1999)

This problem was recognized as substantial in the promulgation of regulations that formally clarified what the meaning of the term “public charge” is and what considerations go into making a public charge determination. According to the INS Notice of Proposed Rulemaking:

“Although Congress has determined that certain aliens remain eligible for some forms of medical, nutrition, and child care services, and

other public assistance, numerous legal immigrants and other aliens are choosing not to apply for these benefits because they fear the negative immigration consequences of potentially being deemed a public charge.” (64 Fed. Reg. 28675, 28676)

The INS continued: “Concern over the public charge issue is further preventing aliens from applying for available supplemental benefits, such as child care and transportation vouchers, that are designed to aid individuals in gaining and maintaining employment.”

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) officials agree. In a letter to the INS, HHS Deputy Secretary Kevin Thoren reported:

“Over the past several years, there has been a significant decline in the receipt of welfare, health, and nutrition benefits by immigrant families and their citizen children, even though many of these families (or individuals within these families) are eligible for such benefits. HHS has received numerous reports from state and local government officials, program administrators, and community leaders around the country that a significant factor contributing to this decline in participation is the confusion and fear that immigrant families have in relation to public charge policies.” (64 Fed. Reg. 28686).

In sum, creating a Lifeline enrollment process through which current participation in public assistance programs is the exclusive means of also obtaining Lifeline benefits will have the effect of systematically excluding low-income legal immigrants on public charge grounds. Requiring current participation erects an entry barrier that is recognized to exclude substantial numbers of legal permanent alien residents.

THE IMPACT OF WELFARE REFORM.

In addition to the impacts which public charge considerations have on immigrant participation in public assistance programs, one further factor that keeps low-income immigrants, even legal permanent residents, out of public assistance programs involves the changing federal statutes

regarding immigrant eligibility. Historically, legal aliens who settled in the United States were eligible for public assistance on the same basis as citizens. In 1996, however, the welfare reform law enacted by Congress barred most legal aliens from receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Food Stamps. In addition, this federal statute authorized states to limit access to Medicaid and to Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) (the cash assistance program replacing the Aid to Families with Needy Children, AFDC). While subsequent legislation restored (or continued) SSI, Medicaid and Food Stamps for a portion of previous beneficiaries, the federal restrictions largely remain.

Eligibility Restrictions

While there is no question but that public assistance has always been restricted for *undocumented* aliens in the United States, the Welfare Reform Act substantially restricted the availability of public assistance to *legal* immigrants as well. The restrictions arose through the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (the “welfare reform” statute). Shortly thereafter, Congress also enacted the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act of 1996, which amended the Welfare Act. It is commonly held that while the Welfare Act reduced benefits to all recipients, the impact of this series of legislation was to impose on legal aliens the greatest burden of the cuts.

Under the Welfare Act as originally enacted, “qualified aliens” were denied eligibility for two specified federally-funded programs: SSI and Food Stamps. While the Act did not directly affect other means-tested programs, it would result in the loss of benefits such as Medicaid, since many states link Medicaid eligibility to the receipt of SSI.

In addition to establishing the class of “qualified aliens,” the Welfare Reform Act created a distinction between aliens legally residing in the United States at the time the Act was enacted

and aliens who entered the country after that date. Aliens entering the United States after the date of the Welfare Reform Act’s enactment (August 22, 1996) are prohibited from receiving *any* benefits from a federal means-tested program for five years after entering the U.S.

The Balanced Budget Act of 1997 restored some of the benefits lost by aliens through the Welfare Reform Act. This statute restored SSI benefits to aliens who had been receiving benefits prior to the date of the Welfare Reform Act. It made benefits available to those pre-Act aliens who may become blind or disabled in the future, although aliens who become 65 without becoming blind or disabled remain ineligible. It also maintained SSI and Medicaid benefits for those immigrants who applied for the program prior to 1979, which was the year that the Social Security Administration first began asking for proof of immigration status.

In addition, in June 1997, Congress enacted a law that allowed states to use their own funds to purchase federal food stamp benefits for legal immigrants made ineligible by the Welfare Act.

One commentator summed up the series of federal statutes affecting the access of legal aliens to public assistance as implementing the following changes:

“The welfare law imposes restrictions on three different categories of federal means-tested benefits. . . . The first form of restricted benefits include the specified federal programs of food stamps and Supplemental Security Income, which are funded exclusively by the federal government. The second form of restrictions includes benefits, which are jointly funded by both the federal and state governments (TANF, Social Service block grants, and Medicaid). The Welfare Act places a mandatory five-year bar on these programs for new immigrants, and allows the states to determine eligibility for immigrants residing in the United States before August 22, 1996 and after the five-year restriction. The final category of restrictions requires states to deny benefits, although solely provided through

state funds, to all unqualified aliens absent affirmative legislation that the state intends to authorize such eligibility.” (Moynihan, 1998).

The restrictions on the receipt of public assistance will, of course, by definition, adversely affect the ability of legal immigrants to access telephone Lifeline assistance programs to the extent that such telephone programs are made dependent on receipt of public benefits. These restrictions will have a substantial effect on the immigrant community.

DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACTS ON OLDER PERSONS AND WOMEN

Two groups of immigrants are particularly likely to be low-income and not assisted through public benefits under the new federal statutes. (Johnson 1995). In particular, the welfare restrictions will exclude older persons (Pickering, 1997) and women (Fitzpatrick 1997) from receiving public assistance.

The first group of immigrants to be disproportionately affected involves older immigrants. One commentator explains:

“ . . . noncitizens are less likely than citizens to qualify for Social Security, which is based on U.S. employment history. As originally contemplated by Congress and the Commission on Economic Security, Social Security is the primary income source for most older adults in the United States, and in many cases, Social Security alone provides income sufficient to preclude SSI eligibility. Elderly immigrants are less likely than citizens to receive Social Security because they often have not been in the United States long enough to compile the requisite work history before retirement. Because they are less likely to receive Social Security, such noncitizens are more likely to be eligible for need-based SSI.” (Polen, 1998).

The second group of immigrants that are particularly likely to be low-income and without access to public assistance involves women. Lawful immigrants become eligible for public assistance through one of three primary mechanisms: (1) naturalization; (2) formal sector

employment for 40 qualifying quarters; or (3) service in the armed forces. As one commentator notes, while seemingly facially neutral, the employment requirement is a particular problem from the perspective of women:

“Immigrant women will be penalized for having dedicated their lives to the unpaid care of their families. Even those who have labored in domestic service for other families may be unable to qualify for the work exception, given extensive noncompliance with Social Security obligations for domestic workers.

* * *

. . . caregiving has been unrecognized and devalued in a society that defines work in terms of measurable output and wages rather than nurturance and maintenance. . . What this means for women's roles and status is that women are expected to perform unpaid work in the home that is regarded as nonwork. As a result, assumptions underlying current public policies arise from a social system in which women as a class are at an economic disadvantage.” (Fitzpatrick 1997).

THE PROCESS OF DEEMING

Aside from the outright prohibition on the receipt of public benefits, the “deeming” provisions of the welfare reform law make it less likely that immigrants will receive benefits, irrespective of their needs. As the Department of Justice notes:

“Under new ‘deeming’ rules, some aliens who might otherwise have been able to obtain certain Federal, state or local means-tested public benefits can no longer do so because their sponsors’ resources may now count as resources available to the aliens (i.e., the sponsor’s sources are ‘deemed’ available to the alien), which would normally raise the alien’s income over the benefit eligibility threshold.” (64 Fed. Reg. 28686).

One commentator explains the process of “deeming” as follows:

“Deeming refers to adding the income or resources of the sponsor to the income and resources of the sponsored alien for purposes of determining the eligibility of the alien for need-based federal assistance programs. The income of the sponsor and his or her spouse are considered available to the immigrant in determining eligibility for benefits. Deeming, therefore, makes it harder for sponsored aliens to qualify for and receive means-tested benefits. Deeming usually prevents an alien from receiving benefits during the deeming period. Deeming applies with respect to AFDC, SSI and food stamps.” (Dawson 1997).

Unlike prior determinations, under the new deeming law, *all* of the sponsor’s income is attributable to the legal immigrant without consideration of the sponsor’s other obligations.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The process of enrolling low-income households in Lifeline assistance programs for telephone service if they participate in other public benefit programs addresses many of the formidable barriers that prevent eligible and needy customers from receiving such assistance.

There is a danger, however, in relying upon such a process as the exclusive means of enrollment. Many low-income persons do not participate in the safety net of public assistance programs. Some of these persons do not participate by choice. Others do not participate because they are, by public policy if not by specific statutory directive, excluded from such programs.

In particular, using participation in public assistance programs as the exclusive door through which low-income persons may enter a telephone Lifeline assistance program will exclude lawful immigrants from such programs. The remedy for such exclusion is not to move away from the use of such programs as a means to establish eligibility. The remedy is simply to allow additional alternative means through which applications and income certification may be made based upon income rather than upon

program participation.

Persons interested in obtaining the full analysis of the impacts of telephone Lifeline automatic enrollment provisions on immigrants may do so by writing:

publications@fsconline.com

Citations

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