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OPINION: Newest White House Proposal on Immigrant Families Stands Out as Especially Cruel

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Foundation leaders

Of all the cruel and unnecessary policies on immigration carried out by the White House, one announced over the weekend stands out.

On Saturday, Department of Homeland Security officials unveiled a plan that would deny legal immigrants green cards or visa renewals if they receive aid through a range of safety-net programs, including food and housing assistance. The proposal targets people who live in the United States lawfully, many of whom have children and who are U.S. citizens. These families typically get vital assistance from safety-net programs — for which they are fully eligible — to supplement jobs that don't pay living wages.

This rule change does not require congressional approval, even though it would be the most sweeping change to our nation's legal immigration policy in decades. The policy would harm potentially tens of millions of children and families across the country and undermine public health.

Grant makers that care about public health, child well-being, education, and economic mobility should all be very concerned. It's not only those of us focused on immigration who need to raise our voices and deploy our grant dollars. All of us who seek to build a nation of opportunity, equity, and inclusion need to step up and take action.

What's under consideration is a breathtaking expansion of the terms under which an immigrant can be denied a green card or visa.

Currently under federal law, green cards and visas can be denied if applicants use cash assistance or are in long-term institutional care. The reasoning is that these individuals would be a "public charge," or dependent on the government. The new definition of the public-charge rule would add a much wider array of key safety-net programs to the list of what would count against someone's

immigration petition, including the use of food stamps, housing subsidies, and many health-care programs, including the prescription-drug program for older adults.

Vital as these programs are to keeping communities healthy, well-nourished, and in decent housing, millions of families will stop using them. Parents will be hesitant to take a child to the doctor because of fear that it could be counted against their immigration case or that of a relative – even though the child getting the care may be a U.S. citizen. Families would face the impossible choice between obtaining essential services for their children and sustaining their chance for a permanent future in the United States.

Nearly 20 million children in immigrant families could be affected by the proposed changes, according to [a report by the Kaiser Family Foundation](#) that examined an earlier draft of the federal proposal. Almost nine in 10 of those children are U.S. citizens.

Far-Reaching Effects

Although the proposed changes target specific government programs, they will have much further-reaching effects. Numerous reports indicate that growing fear and uncertainty among immigrant families are already leading to decreased participation in children's health-insurance and nutrition programs.

The grave likelihood is that under this new rule, Americans will see hunger, illness, child poverty, and homelessness rise and educational outcomes suffer. This will have lasting negative consequences for children and their social mobility, as well as for the economy.

The impact of the new rule would likely fall heaviest on states like California, Florida, New York, and Texas, where over half of all children with an immigrant parent live. In addition, according to the Migration Policy Institute, states with growing immigrant communities such as North Carolina, Ohio, and Pennsylvania will also experience the strain of the policy change.

Despite the national rhetoric, we know that immigrants are a core part of what makes us strong. Immigrant workers contribute 11 percent, or \$1.6 trillion, to our nation's gross domestic product each year. The passion and talents that immigrants contribute have helped build and define the United States since our very beginning.

Our three foundations – among many others – have worked for years to develop effective systems to promote the economic mobility and civic inclusion of immigrants. When immigrants are successfully included in our society, we all benefit. Access to safety-net programs is an important part of this integration system. The new proposal from the administration is not just mean-spirited, it also makes no sense from a public-policy perspective.

What Grant Makers Can Do

In response to the administration's plan, advocates from an array of nonprofit causes are joining forces to raise awareness and defend access to basic needs such as food, shelter, and health care for immigrants and their families. Once the proposed rule is officially published in the *Federal Register*, which is expected to happen any day now, the public will be able to submit comments for 60 days.

What can grant makers do? We can support national, state, and local advocacy efforts, which are being spearheaded by the [National Immigration Law Center](#) and the [Center for Law and Social Policy](#). We can support community-awareness efforts and mental-health programs – anxiety, fear, and trauma among immigrants and their children are soaring. Unrestricted support wherever possible will provide organizations with the flexibility they need to act nimbly in this time, as well as invest in long-term strategies.

Foundations should also consider submitting letters when the public comment period opens, since weighing in on proposed regulations is not lobbying under tax law. [Grantmakers Concerned With Immigrants and Refugees](#) is a great resource for foundations to stay updated and receive guidance.

The administration's plan is a radical reshaping of our nation's legal immigration system that will harm millions of children and families and make it more difficult for communities to successfully integrate into U.S. society. Philanthropy cannot afford to stand on the sidelines.

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