

RESTORING BENEFITS TO VULNERABLE GROUPS OF LEGAL IMMIGRANTS

Summary of the President's FY 1999 Budget Proposals

The President believes that legal immigrants should have the same opportunity, and bear the same responsibility, as other members of society. Upon signing the 1996 welfare law, he pledged to work toward reversing the harsh, unnecessary cuts in benefits to legal immigrants that had nothing to do with moving people from welfare to work. As part of last year's Balanced Budget Act (BBA), the President worked with Congress to restore Medicaid and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) to hundreds of thousands of disabled and elderly legal immigrants. In the FY 1999 budget the President proposes to restore Food Stamp benefits to vulnerable groups of legal immigrants and to provide States the option to provide health assistance to immigrant children.

FOOD STAMP BENEFITS

The FY 1999 budget proposes to restore Food Stamp benefits for the following groups of legal immigrants:

- Families with children. This provision restores eligibility to families with children without regard to the immigrant's date of entry into the U.S. It will assist hundreds of thousands of families with citizen children and legal immigrant parents who are now depending upon only a partial Food Stamp benefit for the citizen children. Restoration of benefits to families with children will ensure that children receive the nutrition they need to become healthy, productive members of our society.
- Immigrants with disabilities and elderly immigrants age 65 and older. This provision parallels the action taken in the BBA for SSI and Medicaid. Consequently it applies to those who entered before welfare reform was enacted. Immigrants who have already come to the U.S. and become disabled or elderly should not be penalized when they have played by the rules.
- Refugees and asylees. The current law exemption for refugees, asylees, and those whose deportation has been withheld would be extended from 5 to 7 years. The Nation admits refugees and asylees for humanitarian reasons and many need more time to naturalize than the current exemption provides. This provision parallels the action taken in the BBA for SSI and Medicaid.
- Hmong immigrants from Laos who came to the U.S. after the Vietnam war. This provision recognizes the unique history and special needs of this group.
- Certain Native Americans living along the Canadian and Mexican borders. This provision also parallels a similar provision for SSI and Medicaid in the BBA that corrects an oversight in the welfare reform law.

The Food Stamp provisions would restore benefits to approximately 730,000 legal immigrants in FY 1999 at a cost of \$2.5 billion over five years. The Administration's proposal would first require immigrants to seek assistance from those who sponsored the immigrant into the country. Recent immigrants whose sponsors signed the new legally binding affidavits of support would be ineligible for Food Stamps unless the sponsor became destitute. When support is unavailable from an immigrant's sponsor, the Nation should provide a safety net for vulnerable groups of immigrants who are legal, permanent residents of our country.

HEALTH COVERAGE

The FY 1999 budget also proposes to provide States the option to provide health care coverage through Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) for legal immigrant children:

- Immigrant Children. This provision gives States the option to provide health coverage through Medicaid and CHIP to legal immigrant children regardless of when they entered the country. States currently have the option to cover legal immigrant children who entered the country before the 1996 Welfare law was enacted. The FY 1999 budget extends this option to allow states to cover immigrant children who entered the country after the 1996 welfare law was enacted.

For this purpose, the budget provides an additional \$230 million over five years in Medicaid. States would be matched at their regular Medicaid matching rate. The budget would also allow states to cover immigrant children through their current CHIP allotment.

This policy provides access to needed medical care for low-income, legal immigrant children who become seriously ill or who have an accident. This policy would also provide access to preventative health care services for a very vulnerable population. The President's proposal does not undermine the central goal of welfare reform -- which is to move adults from welfare to work -- but, would instead allow immigrant children to get the best possible start in life.

Restoring Benefits to Legal Immigrants December 10, 1997

Background: The community is very pleased that the Administration fought for and won the restoration of significant cuts in SSI and Medicaid benefits as part of the Balanced Budget Act, including grandfathering benefits for those already on the rolls and preserving benefits for those who were in the country when the law was signed and who are or become disabled. However, they are concerned that food stamp benefits were not restored. They want our next budget to include a significant proposal to restore food stamp benefits for legal immigrants.

Talking Points:

- Thanks to your hard work, the work of many other groups, and our own efforts, we were able to restore significant benefits to legal immigrants this summer as part of the Balanced Budget Act.
- As you know, we are now in the process of putting together our new budget, and of course we are considering the issue of additional benefit restorations to legal immigrants, along with many other issues. That is why it is especially helpful to hear your recommendations and observations at this time. We are particularly interested in your views on additional restorations Congress is most likely to pass.

Weekly Report
Diana Fortuna
December 12, 1997

Food Stamps for Legal Immigrants -- You asked about an article in this week's New York Times that describes the impact of food stamp cutoffs on legal immigrants in New York. Nation-wide, the welfare law cut off food stamps to over 700,000 legal immigrants. Most cutoffs took place in September. Our budget last year focused on restoring SSI and Medicaid benefits to legal immigrants, rather than food stamps, and as you know we achieved a significant restoration of these benefits in the balanced budget act. Now advocates are pushing us to turn to food stamps and include full restoration of these benefits in our new budget, at a cost of \$3.2 billion over five years.

We are considering this option as part of the budget process, although a partial restoration seems more likely -- restoring benefits to some subset of the population, such as children, families with children, and/or others. One important question is how seriously Congress would consider such a proposal. In contrast to this year's battle over SSI and Medicaid, we will not have the forcing effect of impending cutoffs or the leverage of the balanced budget act this time around. The other major area where benefits have not been restored is SSI and Medicaid for legal immigrants who entered the country after the welfare law was signed, which would cost as much as \$6.6 billion over five years. However, this area has considerably less political support at this time.

States have the option of using their own funds to continue food stamp benefits, as a result of legislation we supported earlier this year. Twelve states have done so or plan to do so, at least in part, with Washington, Nebraska, and Rhode Island restoring all benefits. New York has made it a county option to restore benefits to the elderly and disabled only. New Jersey and California have offered partial restorations as well.

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FOOD STAMP BENEFITS

The 1999 budget proposes to restore Food Stamp benefits for vulnerable groups of legal immigrants. The President's proposals would provide Food Stamp benefits to an additional 730,000 legal immigrants in 1999 at a cost of \$2.5 billion over 5 years. Specifically, benefits would be restored for:

- Families with children. This provision restores eligibility to families with children without regard to the immigrant's date of entry into the U.S. It will assist hundreds of thousands of families with citizen children and legal immigrant parents who are now depending upon only a partial Food Stamp benefit for the citizen children. Restoration of benefits to families with children will ensure that children receive the nutrition they need to become healthy, productive members of our society.
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The Administration's proposal would first require immigrants to seek assistance from those who sponsored the immigrant into the country. Recent immigrants whose sponsors signed the new legally binding affidavits of support would be ineligible for Food Stamps unless the sponsor became destitute. When support is unavailable from an immigrant's sponsor, the Nation should provide a safety net for vulnerable groups of immigrants who are legal, permanent residents of our country.

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This policy provides access to needed medical care for low-income, legal immigrant children who become seriously ill or who have an accident. This policy would also provide access to preventative health care services for a very vulnerable population. The President's proposal does not undermine the central goal of welfare reform -- which is to move adults from welfare to work -- but, would instead allow immigrant children to get the best possible start in life.