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New numbers show how the “public charge” reinterpretation published by the Trump Administration would have significant chilling effects for critical services that help families raise successful children.

Yesterday, the Trump Administration published its proposed reinterpretation of a previously arcane rule, known as public charge. The new interpretation will radically redefine the term public charge, restricting access to green cards and various types of visas for immigrants who are not already fairly well off. That includes some Virginians who are already lawfully present in the United States and immigrants seeking to enter the country to reunify with their families. The new proposed regulations make family income and potential use of health care, nutrition, or housing programs central considerations in whether or not to offer people an opportunity to make their lives in this country.

The direct effect would fall on people applying for a green card or certain visas, as well as U.S. residents hoping to sponsor family members to join them in the United States. For example, lawfully present immigrant women who access prenatal care through Medicaid could have this held against them if they subsequently seek lawful permanent residency (a “green card”).

And the chilling effect would be vastly greater. The Fiscal Policy Institute (FPI) estimates that the chilling effect would extend to 24 million people in the United States, including 9 million children under 18 years old. In Virginia, the chilling effect would include 355,000 people and 151,000 children. These are people in families with at least one non-citizen, and receiving one of the named benefits. In both cases, the large majority of the impacted kids are U.S. citizens.

Community leaders are already reporting that the proposed rule redefinition is causing families to drop services such as health care out of fear. Losing health coverage can have long-term negative consequences for children’s health, educational attainment, and financial success as adults. And assistance with purchasing healthy food through SNAP improves birth outcomes and long-term health for young children. One in four Virginia children has at least one foreign-born parent, and the long-term success of Virginia’s economy and communities requires that Virginia children of immigrants are able to build successful lives.
“Many families occasionally need a hand up, and helping parents and children maintain stability through tough times helps children succeed in the long run. Building communities and an economy that works for everyone includes protecting access to critical safety net programs so that immigrant families, like their U.S.-born neighbors, can take their sick child to the doctor without worrying that it will impact their immigration status,” said Laura Goren, Research Director of The Commonwealth Institute for Fiscal Analysis.

The economic effects are also significant. Looking at just food and health supports, FPI modeled three scenarios: if 15, 25, and 35 percent of those experiencing the chilling effect disenroll. Using the middle scenario, we could expect a $12 billion reduction in supports to families around the country, and on top of that an impact on the economy of up to $24 billion as hospitals and doctors’ offices see reduced revenues and people buy less in supermarkets and other stores. That translates into up to 164,000 jobs lost. The economic effects also serve as an automatic stabilizer, with the biggest positive impact during a recession, when it is most needed, and smaller impacts during an expansion.

In Virginia, the 25 percent disenrollment scenario means $96 million less in federal funds coming into Virginia, a ripple effect of $183 million felt through the health care and food industries, as well as elsewhere, and up to 1,240 jobs lost.

“This proposal seeks to carve out a group of families and threaten them for seeking health care and nutritious food for their children,” says Goren. “As with prior generations of immigrants, when today’s newcomers arrive in the United States, most have little money and many struggle at first to succeed in their new country. Over time, immigrants are able to put down roots and do better financially, bringing new ideas, driving innovation, and even starting new businesses. For many around the world, that’s the American Dream. New rules that target immigrant families for seeking assistance for their children during tough times – just as U.S.-families do – threatens that dream.”

Making it harder for Virginians to sponsor family members to immigrate to the United States also threatens that American Dream.

“Changes to the public charge test will also negatively affect family unity. Exclusionary provisions, such as favoring wealthier immigrants, individuals who are able-bodied and of employable age, are a regulatory backdoor approach to separate families. This is a particular concern for Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities,” says Soo Kyung Oh, D.C. Director of NAKASEC and Federal Committee Chair of the Virginia Coalition for Immigrant Rights (VACIR). “That’s because 31 percent of the 1.1 million getting green cards each year are from Asia and Pacific Island nations and forty percent of family-based immigrants are from Asia and Pacific Island nations.”

The national report is available here. Further information on the Virginia-specific numbers is available by contacting The Commonwealth Institute.

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