

MCGOVERN JOINS FIGHT TO RESTORE FEDERAL BENEFITS TO LEGAL IMMIGRANTS

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Byline: By Keith R. Sirois, States News Service

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Body

In the latest effort to bring attention to the impending cuts facing legal immigrants under the welfare bill, U.S. Rep. James McGovern and other Democrats Wednesday unveiled a petition signed by more than 100,000 people who support restoring benefits.

McGovern joined other Democrats who called for Congress to restore several federal benefits to the nation's elderly and disabled legal immigrants. Currently about 24,000 legal immigrants receive the benefits, about half of which could be cut off on Oct. 1, 1997.

"The welfare reform bill passed by Congress and signed by the President last year was a mistake of epic proportions," said McGovern, D-Worcester, addressing roughly 100 aging Russian and Hispanic citizens on Capitol Hill.

McGovern and other lawmakers want to make sure all legal immigrants who came to the country by Aug. 22, 1996 are eligible for Food Stamps, Medicaid, and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) -- which goes to those over age 64, blind, or disabled.

"(The bill) singled out the most vulnerable in our society -- the poor, the disabled and the elderly -- to be denied even the most basic federal assistance," said McGovern, flanked by both House and Senate Democrats.

"What's worse, this bill targets legal immigrants -- men and women who have come to this country under American laws, worked hard, paid taxes, contributed to our society -- some of whom have even served in our military," he added.

Wednesday's news conference was organized by the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews (UCSJ), the American Association of Jews from the Former Soviet Union and the Council of Latino Agencies.

Following the press conference, U.S. Rep. Luis Gutierrez, D-Ill., and possible future presidential hopeful Sen. Paul Wellstone, D-Minn., introduced the petition on the floors of the House and Senate.

"This issue has a lot of resonance with many Americans, regardless of race, religion, and ethnic background," UCSJ President Yosef I. Abramowitz said. "We believe that people who came here legally, who abide by our laws, and who pay taxes should not be singled out for unjust and unfair treatment."

In the five-year balanced budget agreement pending in Congress, lawmakers agreed to restore \$ 9.2 billion in benefits to disabled legal immigrants who lived in the U.S. when the welfare bill was signed into law. The additional funding, however, will not address those who have emigrated since.

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Republican lawmakers, who initially opposed restoring any benefits, have said they will kill additional funding beyond the \$ 9.2 billion.

"Republicans believe benefits should only go to U.S. citizens or to those non-citizens who have been working in the country for at least 10 years," said Scott Brenner, a spokesman for the House Ways and Means Committee.

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