

FOR IMMIGRANTS, A SENSE OF BETRAYAL < THOSE WHO ARE NOT U.S. CITIZENS WILL PAY< A STEEP PRICE UNDER CUTS CONGRESS APPROVED.

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Body

Maya Resnick is angry.

For 18 years, she has worked in this country. For 18 years, she has paid its taxes. For 18 years, she has refused to take public assistance, even though others encouraged her to do so.

Now, suddenly, the United States seems much less hospitable to this naturalized American, a 1978 refugee from the Soviet Union.

The reason: Resnick's sailing mother is about to lose the government help she relies on.

Cutbacks affecting her - and hundreds of thousands of other legal immigrants who are not citizens - are a key part of the massive rewriting of welfare laws approved last week by Congress. From their benefits will come almost half of the \$55 billion in savings projected over the next six years, even though such immigrants make up closer to 10 percent of the welfare rolls.

Most of them will lose eligibility for two basic supports in America's safety net: food stamps and Supplemental Security Income, an old age and disability assistance program. They could lose Medicaid and family assistance grants, too, although that would be up to the states to decide.

Some exceptions will be made - chiefly for refugees and people granted political asylum, who will remain eligible for benefits during their first five years in the United States. But other new arrivals will be barred from virtually all benefits for at least five years.

The changes have stirred widespread anxiety and fear among immigrants.

In Pennsylvania, some already have had a preview of the cutbacks - a result of Act 35, the welfare legislation that Gov. Ridge signed into law in May. The law scaled back eligibility for general-assistance grants and medical assistance. Immigrants who are not citizens were among the categories of recipients cut off.

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Resnick's mother, Genya Yurchenko, 64, got the news last month after a visit to her doctor to treat a painful foot ailment: Because she is not a citizen, the Department of Public Welfare said, her medical assistance had been canceled.

"She's very depressed; she can't sleep," Resnick said. Yurchenko needs follow-up care, but she cannot go back to the doctor "because we don't have insurance."

Resnick, 43, and her husband and three children recently moved from Northeast Philadelphia to a house in Ivyland, Bucks County. But making it was a struggle, she said. She is a bank teller now, but since immigrating also has worked for jewelers and an advertising company.

In Resnick's opinion, cutting off aid to immigrants is foolish because of the harm it does to hard-working families such as hers.

"A lot of people are citizens and they do nothing for their country," Resnick said. "A lot of people who aren't citizens do much more."

* Immigrants are relative latecomers to the long debate over the welfare system.

When candidate Bill Clinton promised in 1992 to "end welfare as we know it," the spotlight still belonged to such issues as dependency, the availability of jobs, and how to get people to want to work. Clinton and other proponents said reform would cost money, not save it, at least at the start.

The big push to link welfare's overhaul to deficit reduction came when the GOP took over Congress in 1994. House Republicans proposed ending aid to immigrants as part of a package of cutbacks much like those finally adopted last week.

Their first proposal called for using the \$22 billion that would be saved over five years to finance work programs for former welfare recipients.

That support is largely gone in the bill just adopted, which critics say does little about jobs beyond requiring that people get them.

To President Clinton, the lack of work programs stands as evidence that immigrants are being cut off "simply as a budget-saving measure."

Supporters of the cutbacks - such as Sen. Rick Santorum (R., Pa.), who helped draft them - are equally outspoken in their defense. Immigrants should be responsible for themselves, he said. And if they fall on hard times, those who sponsored their immigration - usually family members - should support them.

Santorum is especially critical of older immigrants drawing SSI benefits. The United States, he says, is becoming "the retirement home for the rest of the world."

Samien Nol thinks it is clear why Congress targeted legal immigrants.

Money is the first part of the equation: Not paying it to immigrants saves it for other purposes.

Political influence is the second part: Non-voting immigrants don't have enough.

"We are being targeted because we have no political clout," said Nol, executive director of the Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Coalition, a West Philadelphia organization that helps immigrants and refugees adjust to life in America.

"I think it's not fair, because we are in the country legally and we are working," he said. "Although some of us are on public assistance, a lot of us are taxpaying residents."

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Of those in the Southeast Asian community who rely on assistance, Nol said simply: "They're scared."

Nol said that for some immigrants, the inability to learn English was the reason they did not become naturalized citizens after the five-year waiting period - a move that would now allow them to regain eligibility for federal aid.

For others, he said, the main impediment is an attachment to their homeland, and to the idea of one day returning.

Chuck Bergstresser, executive director of the New Jersey Immigration Policy Network, worries that the cutbacks will burden social-service agencies and charities, and stir tensions between immigrants and non-immigrants. But his biggest concern is fairness. "Most immigrants are here working," he said. "They want to make it in America. They're paying taxes. To deny them access to benefits they're paying for, it's unjust."

* Song Bin, 62, lost her last job three years ago when she was laid off from a chicken-processing plant in Maryland. Last month, she learned she would lose her \$205 monthly stipend from Pennsylvania's s general-assistance program, along with her medical assistance.

She has no money to pay for food and no medical insurance.

She and her husband, who was also laid off from the factory, live in a single rented room in South Philadelphia. He worked for 10 years here and so may be unaffected by the new federal cutbacks, which exempt immigrants who have worked for 40 quarters without receiving any means-tested aid.

To Song Bin, that is little consolation: "It's not fair. As soon as we came to the United States, both of us were working, and we paid taxes."

Notes

SPECIAL REPORT: CHANGING WELFARE

Graphic

PHOTO;

PHOTO (1)

1. Samien Nol (left) and Man Lyan Yong, officials of the Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Coalition, go over papers in their West Philadelphia office. (The Philadelphia Inquirer, RON TARVER)

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