

THE UNKINDEST CUT?; **ELDERLY REFUGEES AND IMMIGRANTS MAY LOSE BENEFITS**

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Body

Yevgeny Eydelson's suit jacket glittered with a World War II hero's medals for defending Russia, from which he fled in 1990 on a rising tide of hatred and persecution of Jews.

He left behind everything he had worked for as an electrical engineer -his pension, his possessions, his savings. The government even took his passport, which had always been marked "Jewish" rather than "Russian," leaving him a citizen of no country.

The United States welcomed him as a **legal** refugee -- and he proudly added a few red, white and blue veterans' commemorative medals to his chest.

As a refugee, the 89-year-old receives \$ 484 a month in Supplemental Security Income, given to the poorest of the poor, \$ 30 a month in **food stamps** and Medicaid.

But he **may** lose everything again as part of federal budget cuts.

If that happens -- a matter expected to be debated in Congress this week -he **may** end up as penniless as when he left Russia.

Thousands of other **legal** refugees and **immigrants** face a similar catastrophe.

Assuming congressional compromises are passed, **legal** refugees **may**, like Eydelson, lose their benefits after seven years of receiving them.

Legal immigrants may never **get** benefits at all if they weren't receiving them before Aug. 22, 1996, the date that budget-cutting measures removed welfare benefits for **legal** aliens.

Protests from states, which will have to pay for lost benefits, and human rights and immigration advocates prodded Congress to reconsider its decision to kick all **legal** refugees and **immigrants** off welfare.

Congress also **got** an additional goad: Record numbers of newly naturalized **immigrants** voted in the November elections, and this rapidly growing cadre of new citizens is a large, vocal constituency, said Judy Mark of the National Immigration Forum.

Many elderly newcomers, because of memory problems, ill health and language difficulties, can't pass the tests required to become naturalized citizens, which would qualify them for benefits.

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Suk Ok Park, for example, a Korean immigrant, is struggling to learn English and American civics and history, a daunting task for an elderly person.

Sunny Kim, a retired Allied manager who put 40,000 miles on his car last year helping Korean elders through the citizenship process, says language is the biggest stumbling block. Park's well-educated husband, Hyu Bang Park, failed twice before learning just enough to become a citizen, but can't carry on conversations in English.

Even those who can pass the tests face an average 29-month delay in having their naturalization papers processed, Mark said.

In the meantime, these almost-citizens go without any income, such as Khaya-Mirlya Soyfer, who waited for nine months without anything to live on after coming from Russia as a Jewish refugee.

Some get ensnared in naturalization delays after passing citizenship exams -- like Ida Goron, another Russian Jewish refugee -- and must scrape by on the meager benefits that their spouses receive.

"Legal immigrants are the biggest losers in welfare reform -- they comprise 44 percent of the total funding cuts but they make up only 5 percent of all welfare recipients," Maria Dominguez, a lawyer who is executive director of the Human Rights Institute, said at the recent American Society on Aging convention in Nashville, Tenn.

These aren't people who come to America illegally; they have the authorization of the federal government and the required documentation as permanent legal residents.

Many are refugees, who come because they have to; war or programs made staying at home impossible. Many are immigrants, who come because they want to; American economic opportunity gives them and their families a chance to prosper.

The impact of removing thousands of these legal newcomers from welfare rolls affects states, which would likely be called on to pay for the lost benefits, said Ann Morse, manager of the Immigrant Policy Project of the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Nationally, 1.4 million legal immigrants would lose food stamps, costing the states \$ 97 million a month. In Virginia, 9,200 legal immigrants would be stripped of \$ 734,000 a month of this lifesaving benefit.

The loss of SSI is even greater -- 7,720 legal immigrants in Virginia would lose \$ 3.3 million every month, part of the 715,117 nationally who would lose \$ 309 million each month, according to coalition statistics.

And when SSI goes, so does Medicaid, the medical program for the poor, leaving aging people -- including impoverished immigrants in nursing homes -with no access to health care, Josefina Carbonell, president of Little Havana Activities and Nutrition Centers in Miami, told the American Society on Aging.

Some, desperate with fear of losing a tenuous lifeline, have even threatened to commit suicide, she said.

Proposed compromises don't restore legal aliens current rights to assistance, Morse noted.

Basic options in proposed compromises, she said, include allowing benefits for those receiving benefits as of last Aug. 22, or covering disabled immigrants who were in the United States but not getting benefits, or covering those who were in the U.S. and who may become disabled later.

Refugees, disabled or not, would lose benefits, including medical care, after seven years instead of the current five years.

The most likely option, Mark said, is allowing those getting benefits as of last Aug. 22 to continue getting them -- if they're disabled.

"The older you get, the easier it is to qualify for disability," Mark said. "Even if you're a relatively healthy 85-year-old, the qualifications for being disabled are less strict than for a 25-year-old. Those who were on SSI prior to

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August 22 can requalify as disabled, and most estimate that the majority will be able to qualify as disabled. There may be legislation that creates a bridge so that they won't be off the program while they're requalifying."

However, she said, those not on the program then, and those who aren't disabled now or in the future, won't get benefits.

Most refugees and immigrants love living in the United States, though older refugees said they would have grown old in their own countries if they could have.

But for refugees like Eydelson, Goron and Soyfer, conditions in Russia were painfully reminiscent of the hatred that surfaced before the Holocaust.

"Most Americans don't understand what it's like to live in a country where you are afraid to walk in the streets," said Nellie Goron, a social worker with Jewish Family Services' Soviet Resettlement Project.

"When Gorbachev came to rule the country, everybody could say whatever they wanted -- and anti-Semitism became more vicious," Eydelson said as Goron translated.

"People could break your windows and not get in trouble for it, even if a policeman was standing there and saw it. They left notes in your mailbox: 'Kikes go to Israel. If you will not leave, we will kill you,' " he said.

A neo-Nazi group, Pamyat (meaning "memory"), became increasingly aggressive. Jewish schoolchildren are told to stay home when this and other anti-Semitic organizations hold hatemongering rallies that draw thousands of sympathizers, Goron said.

Discrimination is rampant: Jewish students are denied access to higher education and jobs commensurate with their intellect and training. They are forced to take the worst housing.

Goron's mother, Ida, voted best internist by her colleagues, couldn't practice in a hospital. Her sister, Ella, first in her nursing school class, delivered her oral exams to her classmates as ordered by professors who admired her mastery. But she wasn't permitted the automatic entry into medical school offered non-Jewish valedictorians.

"That is just the surface. These things are difficult to talk about," Nellie Goron said.

"When people are poor, hungry and threatened, they're angry and turn to find somebody to blame. Who is that? In Russia, it's Jews. When all the Jews leave Russia, they'll find somebody else," Goron said.

"This ban against American benefits is like 'Foreigners, keep out,' " Eydelson said.

"The people ask, 'Why do we have all these problems in America?' 'It's all the foreigners,' they say. But illegal immigrants are one thing; and legal are another."

Graphic

PHOTO

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