

## **Welfare applications rife with mistakes: Audit: Some noncitizens got improper benefits**

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### **Body**

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Apr. 13--County workers made a high number of **mistakes** while processing health and **welfare applications** of **noncitizens**, including illegal immigrants, according to a legislative **audit**.

The results suggest that some **noncitizens** improperly received federal and state health **benefits** while others in need were incorrectly denied those **benefits**, according to the report, which was released Wednesday morning by the Office of the Legislative Auditor.

The **audit** reviewed 137 cases in six counties throughout Minnesota, finding **mistakes** in seven of every 10. While most of the **mistakes** made no difference, 18 percent of the errors may have resulted in incorrect decisions, said Judy Randall, who led the study.

"Eighteen percent is beyond a reasonable, allowable error rate," she said.

The **audit** suggests as much as \$200,000 was spent on **benefits** for people who were ineligible, Randall said. If these error rates were applied to all **noncitizens** applying for **benefits** in Minnesota, the cost could be in the millions. Randall declined to make such a projection, though.

Available public services include health care **benefits** for low-income families and children who are in the United States legally, as well as emergency medical care for illegal immigrants who meet income limits or other criteria. While **noncitizens** represent only 7 percent of the 698,975 people in Minnesota receiving public health **benefits**, their numbers are growing fast.

**Noncitizens** include legal and illegal refugees and immigrants. There were about 173,000 **noncitizens** living in Minnesota last year, and 44 percent of them received some form of public assistance.

The idea for the **audit** came from Rep. Fran Bradley, R-Rochester, who has proposed legislation in recent years to limit the access illegal immigrants have to public health **benefits**.

"I was suspicious for a lot of reasons," he said after reading the **audit** summary. "What I'm finding is my suspicions were grossly underestimated."

He predicted a legislative hearing on the **audit** results and "strong action" by state and county governments.

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This session, Bradley has proposed making county workers legally responsible for notifying immigration officials when an illegal immigrant tries to apply for benefits. Right now, county workers are legally prohibited from doing that.

Only four of the 137 cases reviewed for the audit involved illegal immigrants. Randall said the audit didn't check for cases in which illegal immigrants submitted fraudulent papers suggesting they were legal immigrants.

Some of the errors included workers entering the wrong immigration status in their computer systems or failing to track whether immigrants' documents had expired.

When U.S. residents sponsor foreign relatives to enter the country, their income must be considered as part of the enrollment process. Some county workers failed to do this, and some immigrants received public benefits for several years before the errors were corrected, according to the audit.

Errors are common in cases involving Minnesota citizens, but the complex rules for noncitizens make correct decisions that much tougher, said Linda Melnick, who deals with eligibility issues as an attorney for Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services.

"Mistakes are made all of the time," she said. "We are dealing with computers, and human beings who are error-prone, and policies coming from state and federal government" that are often changing.

The audit called for updating procedures and training on determining eligibility, and the addition of a state employee who specializes in noncitizen eligibility.

Staff writer Patrick Sweeney contributed to this story.

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