

FEDS EASE CITIZENSHIP RULES FOR DISABLED

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Body

WASHINGTON Immigration officials unveiled a new rule yesterday to make it easier for chronically disabled immigrants to become U.S. citizens, and thus remain eligible for some federal benefits.

"Some people who may be subject to [losing benefits under last year's] welfare reform legislation may qualify under this regulation.

But it is not for everyone," said Immigration and Naturalization Service Acting Assistant Commissioner Terrance O'Reilly.

But some who would be helped still face a temporary loss of benefits because of an eight to nine-month backlog in citizenship applications.

Supplemental Security Income checks are being cut off this summer to most elderly and disabled legal aliens.

The new naturalization rule waives civics and English tests for would-be citizens who cannot take them because of a "physical or mental impairment" certified by a medical doctor or clinical psychologist.

INS gave no estimate how many aliens might qualify.

Privately, officials said the potential number of applicants for the waiver was 300,000 to 500,000 nationwide, but fewer were expected to apply.

The disabled applicants would still have to meet standard residency requirements. They also must somehow understand and take an oath of allegiance, even if all they can do is nod or blink an eye.

Immigrant advocates wanted INS to let legal guardians take the oath for aliens too disabled to participate, such as advanced Alzheimer's patients.

"It's a step in the right direction. I'm just surprised they didn't go farther," said Frank Sharry of the National Immigration Forum.

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