

# **BEFORE SENATE, LEGAL-IMMIGRANT ISSUE SOME WANT RESOURCES TO GO TO CITIZENS FIRST. CRITICS SAY IT FLIES AGAINST THE NATION'S IMMIGRANT TRADITION.**

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## **Body**

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As the **Senate** prepares to take up the welfare bill, new attention is being focused on whether **legal immigrants** should be denied benefits.

President Clinton and **Senate** Majority Leader Bob Dole and other senators crucial to welfare reform have criticized the bill passed by the House, which would end cash, food and health benefits to about two million noncitizens.

The **Senate** reconvenes this week after a two-week recess.

Republican governors are lobbying the **Senate** to let states decide about benefits to **immigrants**. And some lawmakers and interest groups **say** more people are beginning to question how a country built by legal immigration could take such a stand.

"The law transforms the meaning of citizenship, which was primarily a way to vote," **said** Michael Fix, immigration expert at the Urban Institute, a nonpartisan think tank. "Now, citizenship is the gateway for benefits that range from flu shots to some educational loans. We'll now have people becoming **citizens** out of fear, not because they **want** to be **citizens**."

Others see something more sinister at work: "**immigrant-bashing**," just as obvious, they **say**, as California's Proposition 187 law, which denies all benefits but emergency medical services to those in that state illegally. Illegal **immigrants** are not eligible for federal welfare programs.

"What's **going** on with Prop 187 is very similar to what's **going** on in the Congress," **said** Peter J. Spiro, a Los Angeles lawyer leading a court battle **against** the law. "It's a divisive **issue** to use when people are coming out of a recession and there is still high unemployment, and people are looking for someone to blame."

House Republicans once worried that their proposal to ban welfare benefits for all **legal immigrants** would be an explosive **issue**. But the ban slid through

because of the money it would save, the lack of organized opposition, and the hectic pace of drafting the welfare bill.

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Supporters say American citizens should get priority to government resources, which would be limited by the House vote to end the federal guarantee of benefits to all in need.

"The bottom line is: What obligation does the U.S. owe citizens of other countries just because they happen to be here?" said Rep. E. Clay Shaw Jr. (R., Fla.), a leader in shaping the welfare bill.

Still, enough key senators have expressed doubts about the ban to give opponents some hope.

Neither Sen. Nancy Landon Kassebaum (R., Kan.) nor Sen. Bob Packwood (R., Ore.), heads of the committees responsible for shaping the Senate welfare bill, likes the idea of telling states who can receive benefits.

Sen. John H. Chafee (R., R.I.), a moderate key to any compromise, has attacked the House plan as too punitive. And Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D., N.Y.), long respected for his work on social issues, just wants to ignore it.

Meanwhile, governors are continuing to lobby for as few strings as possible on federal welfare money. Wisconsin's Republican governor, Tommy G. Thompson, wants to be able to use benefits to help the state's Hmong population. Banning aid to legal immigrants, he said, "may be OK for some states, but we should not be obligated because somebody in Washington has got a problem with one of their states."

New Jersey Gov. Whitman says the ban is unfair.

"My parents are not Native Americans," she said. "So, we all come from immigrant stock, more or less."

In 1993, the nation's 1.4 million legal immigrants accounted for 6 percent of the U.S. population, and 29 percent of them reported incomes below the poverty line, according to a recent federal audit.

Legal immigrants also are concentrated in certain areas of the country, with nearly seven out of 10 living in California, New York, Florida and Texas.

About 6 percent of these immigrants receive benefits from two major welfare programs, Supplemental Security Income, which provides for the elderly and disabled, and Aid to Families With Dependent Children. That compares with 3.4 percent of all citizens.

Republican lawmakers estimated they could save as much as \$22 billion over five years by denying aid to immigrants, even after they agreed to continue aid to those age 75 and older who have been in the country five years and to refugees who have been here less than five years.

There was little pressure to re-evaluate the concept.

One public-opinion poll after another showed overwhelming support for denying benefits to legal immigrants. Republican governors did not like the restrictions, but had to spend their energy fighting over how much money they would get.

And advocates for families and children chose to fight the welfare bill with an issue of more universal appeal: changes in the school-lunch program.

Opposition to the ban was an uphill battle mainly because "we are fighting for a constituency that can't vote," said Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R., Fla.), who voted against the welfare bill.

Ros-Lehtinen and a half-dozen House members who are naturalized citizens or first-generation Americans said they would lobby the Senate to drop the ban on aid to immigrants. Each of the lawmakers, Ros-Lehtinen said, "is a symbol of what immigrants can and have accomplished in this nation."

## Notes

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CLEARING THE RECORD, PUBLISHED APRIL 25, 1995, FOLLOWS:

Yesterday's Inquirer incorrectly stated that 1.4 million legal immigrants account for 6 percent of the U.S. population. The story should have made clear that 1.4 million legal immigrants received benefits in 1993 from two major welfare programs, Supplemental Security Income and Aid to Families with Dependent Children. These beneficiaries account for 6 percent of all legal immigrants, according to the General Accounting Office.

## Classification

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