

FINANCIER OFFERS \$50 MILLION TO AID IMMIGRANTS

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Byline: BYLINE: MICHELLE MITTELSTADT, Associated Press

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Body

Upset by what he calls a "mean-spirited" welfare overhaul that denies food stamps and other federal aid to legal immigrants, billionaire George Soros is offering \$50 million to help lawful newcomers harmed by the law.

"There are real people out there being hurt; that is what I am responding to," the Hungarian-born financier said at a news conference as he announced his Emma Lazarus Fund. It is named for the poet whose words are inscribed on the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. ... "

The idea, he told reporters, is to provide direct assistance for services that help people qualify for citizenship - payment for English-language instruction, civic education, even the \$95 fee required for naturalization. Citizenship, which takes a minimum of five years of residency, brings with it access to assistance denied to noncitizens under the Republican-drafted bill that President Clinton reluctantly signed into law in August.

"We want to spend the bulk of the money on the people themselves," he said, noting that the money will be available immediately and that community-based groups helping legal immigrants can apply for grants.

Soros, who left Hungary in 1947 for England, said he knows what it's like to need the government safety net. While working as a railroad porter in England, he broke a leg. Without access to the British health care system, "I couldn't have taken care of myself," he said.

He moved to the United States in 1956 and became a citizen in the early 1960s. Forbes magazine has estimated his wealth now at \$2.5 billion. His foundations have given hundreds of millions of dollars to emerging democracies in the former Soviet bloc, South Africa, Haiti and Burma.

Immigrant-advocacy groups hailed his gift.

"It's substantively important in that if it's done right - and we have every expectation that it will be - this will help people retain access to benefits," said Cecilia Munoz, deputy vice president of the National Council of La Raza, a Hispanic-rights group that fought the welfare changes.

Soros said he hopes the gift will mobilize others worried about the effects of the welfare law. "I feel very strongly that it goes against the spirit of our Constitution, and probably also the letter," he said.

Under the law, some 900,000 of the more than 9.6 million noncitizens living legally in the United States will lose their food stamps, officials estimate. Another 500,000 elderly or disabled immigrants could lose Supplemental Security Income benefits.

In addition, new arrivals are ineligible for most federal benefits during their first five years of residence.

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Correction

A report in Tuesday's Pioneer Press was incorrect regarding immigrants' loss of federal social service benefits. Immigrants who will lose food stamps and Supplemental Security Income are non-citizens who are not refugees fleeing persecution, have not served in the U.S. military or have not accumulated 40 quarters of work history. Refugees also will lose the benefits if they have been here five years or longer and have not become citizens.

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Graphic

Photo

George Soros

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