

THE BUDGET BATLE;

Immigrants facing loss of benefits;

Republicans say that with aid to U.S. citizens being cut, tax dollars shouldn't be spent on others living here. But immigrants say they pay taxes too.

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Byline: Laura WilliamsonSTAFF; WRITER; Staff writers Kathey Alexander and Lucy Soto contributed to this article.

Body

Nadia Tamariz, who left Mexico six years ago to get a U.S. education, is now a legal permanent resident of the United States. She is also pregnant. And she is poor.

So, like others who live in Gwinnett County and can't afford health care, she goes to a public health clinic in Lawrenceville for prenatal care. Medicaid covers the cost, which could reach several thousand dollars by the time she gives birth.

That angers members of the Republican-controlled Congress, who say that U.S. taxpayers shouldn't have to pay for caring for anyone who isn't an American citizen. And, if this part of the GOP revolution succeeds, they won't.

Bills that have passed both the House and Senate this year would cut off public benefits for most immigrants, both legal and illegal, including some who become naturalized citizens.

If the measures become law:

- Between 1 and 2 million legal immigrants, including about 5,000 in Georgia, could lose Medicaid, disability payments and Aid to Families with Dependent Children, the largest cash assistance program for the poor.
- Tens of thousands of immigrants in Georgia, many of them migrant workers, would lose access to legal aid, a service often used to help immigrants apply for citizenship or permanent resident status.
- Hundreds of students in Georgia could lose federal financial aid. At the University of Georgia alone, 200 resident aliens rely on \$ 1.2 million in federal student grants and loans.
- Local health and welfare agencies would have to verify an immigrant's status before providing benefits, even for services such as childhood immunizations, which would continue to be available to both legal and illegal immigrants. Health officials fear that this would discourage many immigrants from getting the shots.
- Some naturalized citizens could be denied aid if they were brought into the country by a family member. A Senate proposal would make it harder for new immigrants to qualify for welfare and other programs by counting their income with the family member's, raising the person above the income eligibility cutoff. The requirement of counting both incomes would apply to the immigrants for life, even if they become citizens.

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Stopping benefits for immigrants would save the federal government up to \$ 16 billion over five years, with as much as \$ 79 million coming from Georgia, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Opponents call the legislation Draconian. Josh Bernstein, an analyst at the National Immigration Law Center in Washington, said some provisions, such as limiting benefits for some naturalized citizens, appear unconstitutional.

"I'm dumbfounded that this has gotten this far," Bernstein said. "It shows you how really irrational and extreme the proponents are of restricting benefits to legal immigrants."

House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), who helped push the legislation through the House, said Republicans want to send a clear message to immigrants who bring poor relatives into the country but can't afford to take care of them.

"We're trying to say to people, if you want to come to America to pursue happiness, we're for you coming here," Gingrich said. "But if you want to come to America to get into the welfare state, we frankly don't want you to be in the welfare state."

The legislation follows a wave of anti-immigration sentiment sweeping the country, born out of problems in New York and California, where more than half of U.S. immigrants who are on welfare live.

In Georgia, state officials said, relatively few immigrants depend on welfare - just 1 percent of those receiving AFDC are foreign-born. Officials said immigrants are quicker than native-born Americans to get off assistance, because they are more likely to take entry-level jobs.

"They come here to work," said Teodoro Maus, Mexico's s consul general in Atlanta. "Few Mexicans come here to go on welfare."

And immigrants who work pay taxes, Bernstein noted. He pointed to a study by the Urban Institute, a liberal Washington think tank, that found that immigrants are net contributors to the economy, paying \$ 25 billion more in taxes each year than they use in services.

Tamariz said those taxes don't come just from legal permanent residents.

"In many places, whether or not you are legal or illegal, they take money out of your check in taxes," she said through an interpreter. "So they take away the services to save money and they keep the taxes. They get both."

Others say that any expenditure of tax dollars for immigrants is too much when aid for U.S. citizens is being cut.

"When Americans are losing medical benefits, is that any time to be lavishly doling benefits out to immigrants?" asked Dan Stein, executive director of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a Washington- based group dedicated to restricting immigration.

The Republican House proposal would go beyond cutting federal benefits by denying state and local governments the power to replace most of the lost aid. The plan would force states to exclude many immigrants from any programs that use income as a test for eligibility.

Even if states are allowed to spend their own tax dollars on immigrants, which the Senate proposal would allow, it is unclear whether Georgia would.

"No final decision has been made at this point," said Michael Thurmond, director of the state Department of Family and Children Services, which administers the state's s welfare programs.

In Moultrie, immigrants such as Gloria and Fermin Sandobal are watching the debate closely. Gloria Sandobal cooks lunch and dinner for 60 to 80 migrant farmworkers every day, while her husband works in the fields

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harvesting eggplant. The Sandobals are taxpayers whose only brush with public service was when they needed help from Georgia Legal Services to apply for permanent resident status.

But Gloria Sandobal **said** she can envision a time when her family might need help.

"If we can't get access then, they **shouldn't** be taking **taxes** from us," she **said**. "We could save that money to buy our own health insurance."

Graphic

Photo: Legal **immigrant** Nadia Tamariz (right), 20, with her brother Jose, 16, and mother, Maria Tamariz. / WILLIAM BERRY / Staff

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