News



Rhina Guidos

View Author Profile



Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Washington — August 13, 2019

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The Trump administration announced Aug. 12 a plan to deny permanent legal immigration status for those who use public funds such as food stamps or public housing.

The news came as no surprise as administration officials had been publicly discussing for months instituting a "public charge" policy that would hurt immigrants' chances at permanent residency, citizenship and even threatened deportation for those who sign up for public benefits.

The National Immigration Law Center said the term "public charge" in immigration law refers to "a person who is primarily dependent on the government for support," and explained the new rule "would broaden the definition of who is to be considered a public charge so that it includes immigrants who use one or more government programs listed in the proposed rule."

Though immigrants have had to prove self-sufficiency to obtain permanent residency, the expansion of the definition would add a hurdle for some.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops had long argued against it and in September 2018 said such action would "prevent families from accessing important medical and social services vital to public health and welfare."

The chairmen of two U.S. bishops' conference committees reiterated the bishops' opposition to the proposed rule in an Aug. 13 statement.

"We have already seen the culture of fear that the anticipation of this rule has created in our communities. Ultimately, we believe that this rule is in tension with the dignity of the person and the common good that all of us are called to support," said Bishop Joe Vasquez of Austin, Texas, chairman of the Committee on Migration, and Bishop Frank Dewane of Venice, Florida, chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development.

The new policy is set to take effect in 60 days, but it will likely be challenged in court.

"Through the public charge rule, President (Donald) Trump's administration is reinforcing the ideals of self-sufficiency and personal responsibility, ensuring that immigrants are able to support themselves and become successful here in America," said Ken Cuccinelli, acting director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, during a White House briefing Aug. 12.

Catholic Legal Immigration Network Inc. in a statement following the announcement said the policy "is a direct assault on the American immigration system and threatens one of its core principles: family unity."

Since the rule had been expected and because of the "great fear and anxiety" it caused, some immigrant families had refrained from asking for needed government help for health care, food and housing, said Anna Gallagher, the organization's executive director.

"This strategy to suppress family immigration has significant public health and safety implications as families worry about meeting new financial hurdles," she added.

The Christian nonprofit Bread for the World said the new rule would affect the health and well-being of millions of lawful residents. Jane Adams, the organization's senior domestic policy analyst, said those impacted include children who are citizens but who were born to immigrant parents.

"Families will be forced to make the impossible choice of putting food on the table and staying together legally in the country," she said in an Aug. 12 statement.

"The rule is already having a chilling effect on children and families and it hasn’t even gone into effect," she said. "The Bible is clear that God wants us to be generous and welcoming to all people, specifically immigrants. We oppose the administration’s decision and urge them to immediately withdraw this rule."

In separate statements, Catholic Charities USA, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service and the Catholic Health Association also strongly objected to the public charge rule.

Advertisement