

MAR 30, 2022 / IMMIGRATION RESEARCH INITIATIVE

## “I Made Arrangements to go Back to Mexico to Die”: Impacts of the Public Charge Rule on Immigrant New Yorkers



Immigrants are often uneasy about applying for Medicaid, even when they clearly qualify. In 2018, the Trump Administration substantially added to immigrants’ nervousness in applying for Medicaid and other public services when it radically reinterpreted a longstanding “public charge” rule, connecting public economic support with eligibility for green cards and various types of visas in the United States. The Biden

Administration is in the process of revising that rule, but studies have shown that it will take a lot to unravel the fear that was sown in immigrant communities, including among many people who would not have been subject to the rule to begin with.

An estimated 2.1 million New Yorkers would experience a chilling effect from this rule change, deterring eligible immigrants from receiving the supports they need due to fear. This “chilling effect” was revealed in our interviews with immigrant New Yorkers who discussed their Medicaid enrollment experiences.

Lucia, who is currently a citizen of the United States, applied for Medicaid before she received her citizenship. Since she didn’t have citizenship yet, she was nervous to apply for Medicaid because of changes to the public charge rule. She was nervous that applying would affect her ability to become a citizen or that she would lose her green card. When asked about how the public charge rule made her feel about applying for Medicaid, she stated:

“It’s so intimidating. I say I spent so many years in this country, and I don’t want to lose it [her green card]. The woman said ‘don’t worry about it. Your health insurance is not going to be a part of that.’”

A woman at a local community organization who helped Lucia apply reassured Lucia that she was eligible for Medicaid, and that the public charge rule would not impact the step from green card holder to citizenship. The woman, a trusted voice from a community organization, helped Lucia understand that she would not be impacted by the public charge rule, which made her comfortable to apply. Lucia’s comment also highlights that even eligible New Yorkers who would not be affected by the public charge rule still experience a chilling effect.

Lucia goes on to note that trusted voices in the community who can educate people, like the woman that helped her apply, are important to help prevent immigrant New Yorkers from being scared to apply for programs they are eligible for:

“I trust her, but I know for many members in the community it’s not like that... So many people who had legal status did not apply for benefits because they didn’t want to ruin their record and then later on there be some form of punishment for that. Even green card holders, when you read that it’s okay or whatever that it’s not going to be harmful to you...the community still doesn’t trust you because the things that happened with the ex-president Donald Trump and that was a big issue for people to really believe again...Yes, I was scared.”

Lucia’s comment highlights that the “public charge” rule is still having harmful effects on immigrant New Yorkers, even as the Biden Administration works to undo its harm. It is clear that it will take a lot to undo the chilling effects.

For Luis, an undocumented immigrant from Mexico who receives medically essential dialysis, the public charge rule created a life-or-death situation for him. Luckily, he sought out additional information on the public charge rule at a conference, to determine if he could receive dialysis without effecting his future immigration status. When asked how the “public charge” affected him, he stated:

“I thought that they were not going to give me my Medicaid so I was making arrangements to go back to Mexico to die. Because when it [the rule] came out last year, I made the decision I should start making plans because I wasn’t going to live much longer.”

Bernard, an immigrant from Mexico, also expressed that he was nervous when applying for Medicaid. However, he acknowledged that the fear among immigrants is getting better due to the Biden administration when stating, “after the government changed it seemed to get better.”

This “chilling effect” was mentioned by some of the interviewees, but the majority of the interviewees were not familiar with the public charge rule. The lack of knowledge about the rule could be due to many reasons including language barriers, if they applied for Medicaid before the rule was proposed or after it was rescinded, if someone applied for them like refugees, or they may have never heard of it.

Although not all participants expressed fear or nervousness over the “public charge” rule, these first-hand experiences highlight the detrimental and harmful impacts restrictive and anti-immigrant policies have on individual’s lives. According to a recent report from the Urban Institute, the public charge rule deterred immigrants from applying for safety net programs, including eligible New Yorkers, and the rule exacerbated hardships for immigrant families. The chilling effects have not been prevented with the rescindment of the rule by the Biden Administration. More needs to be done to ensure that immigrants do not fear applying for health insurance, especially during a global pandemic, where everyone should be able to remain safe and healthy.

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