



December 10, 2018

Samantha Deshommes, Chief
Regulatory Coordination Division, Office of Policy and Strategy
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, Department of Homeland Security
20 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20529-2140

Re: Request for Public Comment on Proposed Regulation: “Inadmissibility on Public Charge Grounds” – DHS
Docket No. USCIS-2010-0012

Dear Chief Deshommes:

On behalf of Montgomery Housing Partnership (MHP), I am writing to express our organization’s strong opposition to the Department of Homeland Security’s proposed changes to the nation’s “public charge” regulation, which would upend decades of longstanding U.S. immigration policy that has successfully integrated countless immigrants into American society.

MHP is a nonprofit affordable housing developer based in Silver Spring, Maryland, just outside the nation’s capital. At MHP, we take a holistic approach to housing by providing educational programs for children and families to develop skills that will expand their opportunities and see them take leadership roles in their communities.

MHP primarily serves low-to-moderate income individuals, many of whom rely on housing choice vouchers. MHP also serves a large population of immigrant families who, but for our properties, would have limited options for housing. The proposed rule would affect the ability of individuals to apply for and receive virtually all federal housing programs for low-income residents, including Housing Choice Vouchers, Project-Based Rental Assistance, and public housing programs. Not only are the proposed changes cruel, they would exacerbate a host of social and public health issues, from hunger to homelessness.

The proposed regulation already has had a chilling effect on **legal** immigrants’ willingness to seek assistance for basic necessities, in addition, those who lack documentation now worry that receiving government assistance could affect their immigration status. The potential change in policy also has led to misinformation spreading throughout the immigrant community. For example, our staff has spoken with parents of U.S.-born citizen children who are reluctant to apply for Medicaid for their sons or daughters out of fear that it could lead to their family being separated down the line. Parents are making difficult, if not impossible, choices that could harm

their children's health based on fear. This rule change will negatively impact the health and wellbeing of untold number of children, as well as that of the broader community.

According to analysis done by the George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health, changes to the definition of public charge would have detrimental effects “not only for patients losing coverage, but for all patients in the surrounding community.”¹ Case in point, community health centers rely heavily on Medicaid funding. If Medicaid enrollment drops because of this rule change – which is all but certain – it will have a trickledown effect on health center funding and directly impact their ability to care for other residents of the community. This change cannot be made without also harming the economic and physical wellbeing of nonimmigrants.

We are especially concerned about the proposed rule change because it appears to target families with children. A segment of our residents receives benefits for health, nutrition and housing needs. If implemented, the proposed changes would disproportionately impact women, children, the elderly, and people of color - populations that already are vulnerable and in need of support. The change in the definition of public charge, from a person “likely to become primarily dependent on the government for subsistence” to one “who receives one or more public benefits,” even if they are gainfully employed and not primarily relying on these programs for subsistence, is both callous and shortsighted.

Contrary to the myth that public assistance fosters a dependency on government, we have found that our residents who benefit from government programs want to lift themselves out of poverty. The proposed rule change is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the motivations for migration. Immigrants don't aspire to receive public assistance, they aspire to achieve the American Dream: to get an education and create a better life for themselves and their families through hard work. This should be encouraged. But the proposed rule would have precisely the opposite effect, putting families' health and welfare in jeopardy and making it harder for them to thrive.

Immigrant families are no different from native-born citizens. These families want to see their children succeed and reach new heights civically, socially and economically. They are contributing members of the communities they call home. We will become a stronger, more prosperous country not by alienating and demonizing those who rely on public assistance, but by providing the necessary supports to propel them to prosperity. Our efforts would be better spent supporting programs that focus on integrating immigrants into our local communities and economies and encourage youth and families to become active, engaged citizens.

I urge you and the administration to reject the proposed changes to the public charge rule.

Sincerely,



Robert A. Goldman, Esq.
President, Montgomery Housing Partnership

¹ Ku, L., Sharac, J., Gunsalus, R., Shin, P., Rosenbaum, S., (2018) How Could the Public Charge Proposed Rule Affect Community Health Centers?, Geiger Gibson / RCHN Community Health Foundation Research Collaborative, Policy Brief #55.
<https://publichealth.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/downloads/GGRCHN/Public%20Charge%20Brief.pdf>