

Key Actions that States, Localities and Service Providers Can Take to Support Immigrant Access to Health, Nutrition, and Housing Programs

August 2019

An impending Department of Homeland Security rule expanding the public charge doctrine will significantly harm immigrant families. States, localities and service providers have critical roles in minimizing these impacts. This guide highlights key actions, resources, and practice models aimed at ensuring immigrant communities are protected and can access the public programs that keep them healthy, nourished, and housed.

Action #1 - Ensure that families have access to timely and accurate information about the public charge rules, through front-line staff trainings, community outreach, and inter-agency coordination.

Staff Training:

Agencies should ensure all front-line benefit enrollment staff receive basic training on the public charge rules that includes:

- The populations exempt from the public charge rule.
- Timely updates on policy and implementation that might impact the immigrant communities they serve.
- Information on legal assistance hotlines and legal service providers to whom they can direct individuals who need counseling.



For more guidance in this area, see this [Public Charge Webinar for CBOs](#).

Community Outreach:

Agencies should undertake significant outreach activities including:

- Distribute educational materials about public charge through existing outreach channels and ensure all social services outreach workers carry these materials.
- Organize a “day of outreach” when the rule is finalized that includes partnering with community-based and faith-based organizations, schools, and other community institutions (e.g., health centers, libraries, parks, etc.), and flyering at public transportation hubs, grocery stores, etc.
- Use local media outlets to push out accurate and updated information on public charge; work closely with ethnic media to ensure messaging reaches all immigrant communities.

Inter-Agency Coordination:

To ensure an effective, consistent and comprehensive response, states and localities should convene inter-agency work groups that:

- Include local community leaders from immigrant communities.
- Include stakeholders from “emergency” social service resources, such as food pantries and community health centers, who can help assess and respond to the broader impact of disenrollment from public benefits.
- Explore feasibility and readiness of food, housing and health access alternatives to federal programs, and explore options to boost funding for local programs with local dollars.



Action #2 - Ensure that benefits programs protect immigrant privacy.

Privacy concerns contribute to the reluctance of immigrants considering public benefits for themselves or eligible family members. These concerns include whether identifying information submitted with an application will be shared for enforcement purposes. Confusion over existing protections related to privacy can also deter enrollment. To protect privacy and clarify protections, agencies and immigrant-serving organizations should:

Review policies and practices for consistency with the rules that govern when public benefits programs can share information with immigration officials:

A good starting point is the National Immigration Law Center’s (NILC) [Privacy Protections in Selected Federal Benefits Programs](#). To ensure compliance and assuage concerns that may deter enrollment, agencies should:

- Review applications and enrollment systems, reporting systems, and guidance for eligibility and enrollment workers and make necessary corrections.
- Provide community members with easy-to-understand information about existing confidentiality protections in multiple languages.
- Be flexible about how household members prove their income, including through a letter from an employer, self-attestation, or other means if needed.

Partner with immigrant-serving organizations to provide accurate information to immigrant families:

Partnering with faith-based organizations, community health centers, hospitals, community-based organizations, schools, immigration attorneys, immigrant-focused media outlets, food banks, social justice organizations and others helps ensure that accurate information gets to the people that need it and that people know their rights to privacy and confidentiality. Good examples of how states have messaged for immigrants and the organizations that serve them can be found [here](#).

Action #3: Ensure that people impacted or potentially impacted by new public charge rules have access to accurate legal guidance.

Final public charge rules will create great demand for legal assistance. Meeting this demand will be particularly challenging because the public charge doctrine implicates both family-based immigration and public benefits law. To address this, state and local leaders should:

Expand funding for legal services related to public charge:

This could include contracting with local nonprofits that have community connections and capacity to do the work like [California](#), [New York](#), and Massachusetts. In addition, [Illinois](#) increased its annual state budget for [legal services provision](#) to meet public charge needs. Different pots of funding may be available - Seattle/King County leveraged both state and county funding to respond to community needs.

Promote collaboration among entities that serve immigrants and their families:

These collaborations can bring complementary expertise and greater resources to bear on the issue. Seattle and King County have a joint [Immigration Legal Defense Network](#), in which [funding is shared between the two entities](#). New York City has a [Liberty Defense Project](#), a public-private partnership that includes free legal consultations and direct representation to immigrants. Jurisdictions should also consider funding to create infrastructure to serve immigrants at the intersection of health, benefits, and immigration.

Build pro bono legal networks:

For example, Illinois advocates plan to provide immigrant-serving organizations with training and a screening tool for people who may be subject to public charge. Once identified, these immigrants would be referred to a hotline where they can receive individualized advice to help them make an informed decision about their public benefits usage.



Action # 4: Monitor state/ local data for signs of significant drops in enrollment for entitlement and safety-net programs, spotlighting growing unmet needs in the community in real time.

Consider conducting analyses of local data to identify drops in enrollment that may warrant response (e.g. such as [this](#) from New York City, which looked at [analyzed](#) SNAP disenrollment data on a monthly basis).

Work with community partners to compile data on increases in demand at nongovernmental service providers, such as food banks, community health centers, and other nonprofit social service providers.

