



Dr. Olga Varechtchouk
Guest Essayist

Don't refuse citizenship over aid

“Public Charge” blocks path to American Dream

This is my personal story illustrating the flaws surrounding “Public Charge,” which makes it significantly more difficult for legal immigrants to obtain green cards or citizenship if they currently require or have ever relied on public benefits.

When I was 8 years old, my family and I moved to America in hopes of a brighter future. Leaving a country with few opportunities and questionable political morality, we clung to that green card like it was our golden ticket. My mom, brother, and I settled in Florida, owning nothing but several items of old clothing and memories of our past culture and life.

Though my mom was an accountant in our native country, her degree was non-transferable. That, in combination with our lack of English skill, threw us to the very bottom of the social hierarchy. She had to get four minimum wage jobs at once, working day and night just to make ends meet, though this brought us nowhere close to the poverty level.

It took her nearly a decade of hard work, countless sleepless nights, and frugality to finally get the chance to go back to school and get her degree once more. During this entire time, we qualified for, though didn't necessarily accept, every form of public assistance. We also paid taxes, went to school, worked hard, and contributed to society.

Years later, my mom is a CPA, my brother deals with finance, and I am a doctor. We continue to help others and have made the most of our lives here. We are also now all United States citizens and are eternally grateful for it. Yet, to think that this might not have happened if we applied for citizenship in the setting of today's political ignorance is shameful.

Immigrants are faced with numerous hardships that those who have never traveled outside of their native country can only imagine. Language limitations, alone, serve as a huge barrier to communication and financial success. Add this to cultural differences, a lack of foundation, little to no family supports, and young kids, and you can envision how difficult it can be to thrive.

Therefore, provision of temporary assistance, as is in question by the proposed extension of “Public Charge,” should not be the cause of an immigrant's inability to become a US citizen.

This assistance alleviates only some of the many disparities these populations and their families are faced with upon coming to the United States. Without it, the hope of a better future will be torn away from those who have already endured and lost so much on their path towards the American Dream.

Dr. Olga Varechtchouk is a pediatrician in Rochester who immigrated to the U.S. from Ukraine.

