



children's
defense fund
texas

Advisory

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For Immediate Release:

Public Charge and Private Dilemmas Report Release

Friday, November 6, 2020

8 a.m.

The Children's Defense Fund - Texas is releasing a report on Public Charge and the "chilling effect" in Texas this Friday, at 8 a.m.

Between the years of 2016-2019, Texas experienced a rapid drop in enrollment in public benefits programs. Interviews with more than three dozen individuals and organizations from across the state made it abundantly clear that the decline in public benefit usage was directly related to the climate of fear in immigrant communities created by the current administration's anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric. Specifically, changes to the "public charge" rule, which initially suggested that any use of a wide array of public programs would disqualify those seeking to become legal permanent residents or citizens, caused thousands of families to refuse to access critical health and nutrition benefits - even for their fully eligible citizen children. While the published final rule actually included a very narrow set of benefits that would have any impact on immigration status, the "chilling effect" rippled throughout immigrant communities.

This report explains the impossible choices Texas' immigrant and mixed-status families are facing. For Texas' government and service organizations, the report offers recommendations to help accurately inform immigrants about the benefits still available to them. If the current environment of fear and confusion is not quelled, the whole country, not just immigrant families, will face disastrous consequences in public health, education, and the economy.

Anecdotes like the following set the stage for an alarming trend, where families are being systematically scared away from accessing housing, health, nutritional supports, and other public benefits available to them. "People reject items we're trying to hand out for free, things like backpacks and school supplies. And they'll tell us it's because they don't want to get in any immigration trouble. They refuse flu shots and immunizations for kids, fearing immigration backlash." This fear was compounded by confusing policies, anti-immigrant rhetoric, and conflicting messages from advocates, attorneys, and the media.

This report provides an understanding of the problems that have exacerbated the chilling effect and gives suggestions of best practices that can help families receive health and nutrition services without threatening their status. Interviewees offered effective and creative strategies to help immigrant and mixed-status families access the crucial services they need. These best practices outlined in the report include staff training on public charge, simple resource documents, community partnerships, collaboration and outreach, and relentless empathy.

Dr. Cheasty Anderson concludes this report with a call to action: “Without a dedicated response to address the chilling effect and to rebuild a robust community outreach and enrollment effort, negative outcomes are inevitable. We must recognize that widespread reduction in benefits enrollment has direct impacts on Texas’ public health outcomes, educational attainment, and its economy. We must also take action now to rebuild trust between public programs and the communities they are supposed to serve.”