

# Welcome to America

## *Still the immigrant's retirement haven*

by Don Barnett

According to recent reports, about 500,000 elderly legal immigrants would have lost welfare/Medicaid under the 1996 welfare law. "It ought to weigh on the consciences of those [lawmakers] who knew what they were doing was wrong" in the words of a *Washington Post* column by David Broder.

Every major domestic newspaper has done a front-page piece on the putative effects of barring elderly immigrants from Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Typical is a Molly Ivins column about those who "worked hard, paid their taxes ... now talking about committing suicide. Just what we always wanted to do: drive a bunch of retired Japanese gardeners and 80-year-old Hispanics whose backs are bent from years of field work to commit suicide." Actually, most non-citizen users of SSI are not Hispanic; Japanese comprise less than half a percent of non-citizen users of SSI. It's entirely possible that not even 100 of the more than 800,000 non-citizen recipients of SSI are Japanese gardeners.

The profile of those who have contributed most to recent growth in immigrant SSI usage is very nearly the opposite of that propagated by the "imagineers" of the national media — that is, they are recent arrivals who have not worked in the U.S. About 40 percent of the growth in SSI usage is in humanitarian categories. Former Soviets, Vietnamese, and Cubans — all humanitarian admissions — occupy second, third and fourth place respectively among non-citizen users of SSI/Medicaid. Under the new law, they are still eligible for welfare 30 days after arrival, but must become citizens in order to continue receiving benefits after 5 years. Most of the rest of the growth is from non-refugee immigrants who enter the

system as soon as legally possible, that is, 5 years after arrival. Indeed about 60 percent of current immigrant users of SSI/welfare have been in the country for less than 6 years.

The claim that barring noncitizens from welfare would cause 500,000 elderly immigrants to lose benefits comes from a report released by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO). In reporting the estimate, no one bothered to mention that CBO's analysis was based on the assumption that only one-third of elderly noncitizens receiving welfare would naturalize by the year 2002 even though all would be time-eligible for citizenship. Among many rickety assumptions, this, according to the authors of the report, was the most uncertain.

The campaign against the reform went beyond gonzo journalism and gave birth to a new PR tactic — the suicide list. No doubt we shall next be hearing about "national health insurance suicide lists" while opponents counter with "IRS suicide lists." But even before Ted Kennedy took to the Senate floor with his "immigrant SSI suicide list" all hope for rational debate on the topic had been washed away in a tide of cliché and misinformation.

At last count welfare reform had triggered 14 proposed bills with the sole aim of securing welfare for noncitizens. Six of the proposed bills mandate an easing of naturalization procedures including a bill to allow certain Filipinos who participated in World War II to naturalize in the Philippines. Will we next set up voting booths and Medicaid clinics around the world so that the new citizens can avoid ever setting foot on U.S. soil?

A legislative compromise will probably allow those immigrants receiving disability SSI when the welfare bill was signed to remain in the system. Under some proposals those currently receiving old-age SSI who manage to requalify as disabled will also be covered. As well, the cutoff date will be extended allowing current recipients more time to naturalize. A small number, nowhere near the latest mythical number of 300,000, will actually lose benefits because they will not or cannot naturalize. Most of those will depend on their children as they

---

*Don Barnett has written on immigration for various national publications and is a frequent contributor to THE SOCIAL CONTRACT.*

promised they would when they immigrated. There will be an even smaller number of needy recipients who will actually lose benefits; for some, temporarily, until they have passed the citizenship test.<sup>1</sup>

States and localities cannot be blamed for doing everything possible to keep welfare recipients on the federal tab. But, could the interest groups, "open society" foundations, or even the very organizations which sponsor new arrivals be counted on to lend some direct assistance however slight to individuals who find themselves temporarily cut off from a check or in need of food assistance? That was the question raised by Valery Weinberg, the publisher of *Novoe Russkoe Slovo*. *Novoe Russkoe Slovo* is the largest Russian language newspaper in America with about one million subscribers world wide. Mr. Weinberg states that without public assistance the stream of migrants would "begin to dry up." Under current reforms no such slowdown is on the horizon, though there might be a change in the mix of future migrants from those who find citizenship a daunting prospect to those willing and able to claim the "priceless possession" as it was once called by the Supreme Court.

Responding to concerns of his readers Mr. Weinberg met with representatives of United Jewish Appeal, the Hebrew International Aid Society, and the New York Association of New Americans — leading organizations in refugee resettlement. (Former Soviets, mostly Jewish refugees, are the fastest growing immigrant group of SSI users, in some recent years growing at an annual rate of 34 percent.) The answer to Weinberg's direct question about assistance from the charities was a direct "no." Pleading lack of funds, the mega-charities promised instead to "fight to the end" for the "rights" of the welfare recipients. Resources go much further when put into lobbying and into backing efforts to sue federal tax payers through legal challenges to the law. Also, a great deal of money is needed to "educate the public" about the need for current levels of immigration. As Thomas Sowell stated recently, "Those who thus raise the cost of immigration to the American people are the loudest in demanding freer immigration."

Many would gladly accept allowing all current recipients to remain in the system if additional numbers could be prevented from piling on. To be meaningful that would mean barring both noncitizens and those who naturalize for the

purpose of meeting welfare eligibility requirements. Naturalizing one's parents is an easy and legal way to shed responsibility for them. The new law, even before it was corrected, did not address this and therefore will not, in its latest incarnation, do much about growth except shift it to the citizen category. Without changes in the mix of immigrants there will be only a slight impact on current numbers and future growth. The Social Security Administration currently tracks SSI usage by noncitizen and citizen categories. At the very least it should attempt to report a true picture of immigrant usage by tracking a "foreign-born" category which would include naturalized citizens.

In the absence successful reform, SSI/Medicaid for elderly non-citizens is projected to hit \$43 billion a year by the time the budget is to be balanced in 2002. With *this* reform the cost might be, well... 43 billion a year, but shifted to the citizen category where it won't be noticed for a while.

The *real* story behind welfare reform is that retired immigrants who wait 5 years and pass the citizenship test gain a lifetime entitlement to public support. For refugees planning on becoming citizens that entitlement begins 30 days after arrival. As caps on other forms of welfare begin to take effect for native born Americans, the arrival of elderly refugees and immigrants with a lifetime entitlement to cash, food and medical care will no longer be so easy to overlook. In fact, few consequences of welfare reform have the potential for mischief like the moment in the not too distant future when newly arriving immigrants are ushered onto the dole while native-born Americans are pushed off it. Ethnic group infighting over social services, a subplot of the welfare debate, has been largely ignored in the media. Though it crackles through the ethnic press and in the streets, the leadership of the contending sides seems to understand that all sides will lose if the conflict breaks out into the open. It's doubtful this public civility will survive full implementation of welfare reform. By that time those who "ought to know better" might actually have something to write about.

**TSC**

[*Editor's note: Since the submission of this article, Congress has given SSI/Medicaid back to all non-citizens, aged and disabled, who were receiving benefits as of August 1996.*]