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America Is Becoming a Deluxe Retirement Home

By Robert Rector and William Lauber

America's welfare system is rapidly becoming a deluxe retirement home for the elderly of other countries.

Many individuals now immigrate to the United States specifically to obtain welfare benefits that far exceed those available in their own countries. Non-citizens today are among the fastest growing groups of welfare dependents.

In 1982, there were 127,000 alien residents receiving aid from the Supplemental Security Insurance program. By 1994, that number had mushroomed to 738,000 — a 580 percent increase in just 12 years. The overwhelming majority of immigrants on SSI is elderly. Most seek welfare within five years of coming to the United States.

The data show that welfare is becoming a way of life for elderly immigrants. An analysis by Professor Norman Matloff of the University of California at Davis shows that 45 percent of that state's elderly immigrant population received cash welfare in 1990. Among Russian immigrants the figure was 66 percent; among Chinese, 55 percent.

And the practice is increasing. If current trends continue, the United States will have more than 3 million non-citizens on SSI within 10 years. Without reform, the total cost of SSI and Medicaid benefits for this population in the next decade will amount to more than \$328 billion.

Immigration should be open to individuals who wish to come to the United States to work and become self-sufficient. America has always opened its doors to those who seek opportunity. But immigration should not become an avenue to welfare dependence.

Sources both in the United States and in foreign countries provide lots of advice on how immigrants can obtain welfare benefits. For example, in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and in Chinese bookstores in America, you can buy a Chinese-language publication entitled "What you Need to Know About Life in America," which includes a 36-page guide to SSI and other welfare benefits. In fact, the largest-circulation Chinese-language newspaper in the United States, *Shijie Ribao* (World Journal), now runs a regular Dear Abby-style advice column on SSI and other immigration-related matters.

Placing reasonable restrictions on immigrants

receiving public assistance has always been part of the American tradition. The nation's first immigration law, passed by Congress in 1882, instructed immigration officials to deport any person who, in their opinion, might become a public charge. Even today, the Immigration and Nationality Act declares unequivocally: "Any alien who, within five years after the day of entry, has become a public charge from causes not affirmatively shown to have arisen since entry is deportable." The problem is, this provision of the law is not enforced.

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Relatives who sponsor the entry of elderly individuals into the United States implicitly promise their charges won't become a burden to U.S. taxpayers. But many, if not most, sponsors are enrolling their elderly immigrant relatives on welfare soon after the end of the three-year waiting period. Once on SSI, there is every indication these immigrants will remain on welfare indefinitely.

While Americans greatly sympathize with those who come to this country having suffered from political and economic oppression, U.S. welfare programs cannot redress those wrongs, nor should they serve as a global retirement pension. Besides, while many of the elderly non-citizens on SSI come from politically oppressive nations such as Cuba or the former Soviet Union, the majority come from other nations such as Mexico, the Dominican Republic, India, South Korea and the Philippines.

Most elderly immigrants have relatives who can support them. And most immigrant sponsors do, in fact, support their immigrant relatives for at least three years after their arrival. Terminating SSI benefits would simply mean having sponsors continue taking care of their elderly immigrant relatives.

Just as Americans expect parents to support their children, they also must expect individuals to care for and support their relatives who come to this country. This obligation should be permanent.

Under no circumstances should the cost of supporting elderly immigrants be borne by the American taxpayer. ■