

December 16, 2019

Samantha Deshommès
Chief, Regulatory Coordination Division
Office of Policy and Strategy
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services
Department of Homeland Security
20 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Mailstop #2140
Washington, DC 20529-2140

Re: Proposed rule: “U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Fee Schedule and Changes to Certain Other Immigration Benefit Request Requirements”
DHS Docket Number: USCIS-2019-0010

Dear Chief Deshommès,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) proposed rule on “U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Fee Schedule and Changes to Certain Other Immigration Benefit Request Requirements” published on November 14, 2019. On behalf of Children’s HealthWatch, a network of pediatricians, public health researchers, and policy and child health experts, please accept these comments and our strong opposition to the proposed fee schedule and changes to other immigration benefit request requirements that will threaten the health and well-being of families of immigrants, including children.^{1,2}

Immigrant families are an integral part of our communities —they are our neighbors, coworkers, friends, and fellow parents. One in four children under age 8 in the U.S. have at least one immigrant parent; of those children, 93.3 percent were born in the United States.^{3,4} Even though US citizen children with an immigrant parent are more likely to live in a family with a full-time worker compared to children of US-born parents,⁵ their families disproportionately experience economic hardships^{6,7} associated with adverse health and developmental outcomes for young children.^{5,8,9,10,11} These economic hardships are exacerbated by existing federal and state policies that create barriers to stable employment with living wages, and other resources including assistance programs necessary to afford basic family necessities like food, shelter and health care for families with low incomes.^{12,13}

Immigrant families are a fundamental part of our American history and values. For hundreds of years, the United States has welcomed immigrants and their dream for a better, more prosperous life. However, the changes detailed in the proposed rule would put the American Dream out of reach for many immigrant families. At the same time that DHS is seeking this historic increase in the fee for naturalization and other benefits, it is planning to completely cut-off access to immigration and naturalization for certain people by eliminating well-established fee waivers. These waivers allow qualifying, at-risk people and families with low-incomes to maintain their immigration status or take the next step to become a permanent resident or citizen. Immigration experts report the filing fee associated with various immigration benefits can be an insurmountable obstacle for an immigration benefit or naturalization application. The changes to the fee waiver application and acceptable documentation will discourage eligible individuals with low incomes from filing for both fee waivers and immigration benefits. Terminating this program will put families at risk of potentially losing their documents and becoming vulnerable to deportation. This may lead to family separation, which

would inflict unnecessary hardship and trauma on both immigrants and future generations of US citizen children, as family separation has documented profound impacts on child health and well-being.^{14,15} Family separation is an extremely stressful and traumatizing experience for children, which neuroscience shows can alter the architecture of a child's brain and have lasting consequences.¹⁶ It also can have long term impacts on family bonding, development, and child social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes.¹⁷ The proposed rule would also increase or establish application fees for lawful permanent residency, DACA, certain asylum claims, and several other applications. Furthermore, it would transfer over \$110 million from USCIS to Immigration and Customs Enforcement for enforcement purposes, contributing to an increased focus on restrictive immigration policies and enforcement that create fear and stress that negatively affect children's physical and mental health and cognitive development.¹

The proposed changes to the fee schedule and other immigration benefit request requirements create an additional burden for immigrant families. We are particularly concerned about the drastic increase in naturalization and other application fees, as well as the establishment of a new \$50 fee to seek asylum. If put in place, an asylum fee would dramatically increase the risk to the lives of asylum seekers. If implemented, the U.S. would become only the fourth nation in the world to charge people who are fleeing for their lives and seeking asylum, unnecessarily politicizing human life. The proposed rule also includes a historically drastic 83 percent increase to the naturalization application fee, raising the cost from \$640 to \$1,170. Previous research demonstrates immigrants with low incomes are able to improve their financial stability following naturalization as they are often then afforded better access to educational opportunities, jobs, and other resources.¹⁸ We think this is critical to improving health because decades of research links financial stability, including ability to afford enough food, housing, utilities, medical care and prescription medicines, to healthy early childhood health and development and positive health among parents.^{8,9,10,11} However, this extreme increase in cost would make naturalization impossible for many immigrants by restricting citizenship to only those who can afford it. In turn, this places the health of immigrants and their children at risk, and contributes to inequities that privilege affluence.

We are concerned that this proposal will place a significant burden on individuals applying for immigration benefits and will likely result in poor health outcomes among young children - the majority of whom are US citizens - with immigrant parents. This rule will not only impede an individual's ability to naturalize, seek asylum, or receive an immigration benefit, but will likely also have downstream effects on family health and economic stability.

The proposed rule will do harm: The changes will drive up national healthcare and education costs and impair over the long-term our national health, educational achievement, and economic status. By only allowing those with existing wealth and resources to immigrate to the United States, we are harming the health of children and vital communities within our country, and distancing ourselves from the American value of opportunity, forgetting the lower income origins of many of our forebears. Therefore, we strongly oppose any administrative action that would harm the health of children and their families and urge the administration to immediately withdraw this proposal in its entirety.

Sincerely,



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