



Immigrant Coverage: Giving States the Option to Eliminate the Five-Year Wait for Medicaid

Under the health reform bill pending in the Senate, legally present immigrants remain barred from Medicaid for five years, even if they meet all other qualifications. This runs counter to our nation's traditions of fairness and excludes immigrants from a critical safety net their taxes help support. Health reform should provide states with the option to extend Medicaid to all qualified legal immigrants.

How did the five-year waiting period come about?

Congress imposed the waiting period as part of welfare reform legislation in 1996. Legal permanent residents – immigrants with green cards – are eligible for Medicaid only after five years in the United States. Earlier this year, Congress gave states the option of removing the waiting period for children and pregnant women to enter the Children's Health Insurance Program, but most recent immigrants remain excluded.

How many immigrants are affected and what do we know about them?

- As many as 600,000 legal immigrants may be eligible for Medicaid if the five-year waiting period is eliminated.¹
- Immigrants work in our communities, pay taxes and contribute richly to life in the United States. Most legal permanent residents are on a path to citizenship.
- Many legal immigrants are uninsured because they work in industries or small businesses that do not offer health care coverage.

Why should we give states the option to extend Medicaid to legal immigrants?

- The waiting period is unfair and unhealthy if people don't get other coverage.
- Immigrants faced with the five-year wait would likely be eligible for insurance subsidies under the health plans pending in Congress. Providing Medicaid, rather than subsidies, to those with lowest incomes would cost the government less.
- States now using their own funds to provide insurance for legal immigrant adults would get federal matching money.
- The majority of Americans support eliminating the five-year waiting period for legal immigrants.²

Please support Senator Menendez's amendment to give states the option to extend Medicaid to all qualified legal immigrants without a five-year wait.

¹ Migration Policy Institute. "Immigrants and Health Care Reform: What's Really at Stake?" <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/healthcare-Oct09.pdf>

² National Immigration Law Center