Rule change would force people to choose between food and family

By THOMAS REYNOLDS AND TAYLOR HOANG
Special to The Times

As the head of Washington state’s largest hunger relief agency, and as a small-business owner, economic policy adviser and immigrant to the United States, we strongly oppose the Trump administration’s rule change that restricts lawfully residing immigrants from accessing public benefits such as food assistance, health care and housing vouchers.

Worse, use of those benefits potentially could harm their chance of getting a green card. Some families may withdraw from public assistance programs altogether out of a fear they will be deemed a “public charge” and ineligible for legal resident status.

This cruel and unnecessary policy change conflicts with our shared core value of helping all neighbors in need of food, medical care and shelter.

We believe anyone in need of food should be given food, no questions asked. This is because we believe food is a basic human right. Food is the key ingredient to maintaining good health — the health our children need to focus on learning, the health parents need to find and keep work, the health seniors need to be active and independent.

Perhaps the most troubling part of this policy change is that it makes families feel as though they are being asked by our government to choose between food that keeps their family healthy or the certainty of staying together. The rule change sets up immigrants who utilize government programs at risk of deportation.

All hungry people are already asked to make impossible choices that none of us would want to face: do I eat, or do I put the money toward rent? Does my child eat lunch, or do I put the money toward my mother’s cancer treatment? These are real choices that must be made when income and earnings aren’t enough to cover all basic necessities.

In addition to the rule change, the current House Farm Bill proposes cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or food stamps. SNAP is used to buy food from local grocery stores, farmers markets and farm stands. In fact, one in eight working Washington residents relies on SNAP because their wages aren’t enough to feed themselves and their families.

SNAP allows families to afford the nutritious meals they would otherwise have to skip, and all of us are better off for it. For every $5 of SNAP benefits spent, $9 of economic activity is generated in our local communities in the form of jobs and revenue for retailers and growers. In fact, last year, SNAP pumped $1.5 billion into Washington’s economy.

The rule change, in tandem with cuts to SNAP, is mean spirited and ill-conceived, creating harsh and life-altering penalties for low-income children, seniors, people with disabilities, veterans, and low-wage workers.

If the rule change takes effect, it threatens a long-term consequence for our local immigrant communities — a potential roadblock to citizenship that puts individuals at risk of separation from home and family just because they asked for help.

Would you want to be forced by the government to choose between safeguarding the health and safety of your family or protecting your family’s ability to stay together?

The rule change and funding cuts threaten to roll back the years of progress we have made against poverty and hunger.

We cannot just sit idly by and watch our most vulnerable neighbors become collateral damage, stemming from hard-lined ideologies. Together, we stand against these changes. No one should have to choose between food and family.