



MEDIA ADVISORY

MEDIA CONTACT: Jordan Rubin
EMAIL: jordanr@northwestharvest.org
TELEPHONE: 206.923.7426
TWITTER: @nwharvest
FACEBOOK: Facebook.com/NWHarvest
WEB: northwestharvest.org

NORTHWEST HARVEST FIGHTS FOR FOOD AS A BASIC HUMAN RIGHT

Official Statement on Expansion of Public Charge Rule from Washington's Leading Hunger Relief Agency

(Seattle, WA – August 14, 2019) As Washington's leading anti-hunger organization, Northwest Harvest condemns the heartless and harmful public charge expansion rule, [published today](#) on the Federal Register. As an agency focused on improving access to nutritious food for those who struggle with hunger, we stand in solidarity with our newest neighbors who face the unimaginable heartache of having to choose between the promise of living with family here in the United States, or the resources that help keep their families healthy, housed, and fed. The decision to forgo this kind of help—*often only temporarily needed until work is found and wages are earned*—puts the health, safety, and security of all our communities at risk as we see hunger and poverty rise when it otherwise could be mitigated with the lawful use of basic safety net services.

“This proposed policy directly conflicts with our shared core value of helping all neighbors in need of food, medical care, and shelter,” stated Thomas Reynolds, Northwest Harvest CEO. “We believe anyone in need of food should be given food, no questions asked. This is because we believe food is a 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.”

The public charge expansion rule allows immigrations officials to count the use of SNAP, Medicaid, and housing programs as a negative factor when considering applications for green cards (i.e. permanent residency) or for temporary visas. “SNAP is our first line of defense against hunger,” said Christina Wong, Northwest Harvest's Director of Advocacy and Public Policy. “It is shameful that this rule weaponizes SNAP against legal immigrants who want to work and become part of the American fabric. It punishes them for using services that they are otherwise legally allowed to participate in.”

The rule is set for implementation on October 15 unless a lawsuit can successfully block implementation. Nevertheless, service providers have already seen the chilling effect on immigrants' lawful use of these programs: according to a recent Urban Institute study, 1 in 7 adults in immigrant families has either not applied for or has dropped out of using public benefits programs despite being lawfully eligible.¹ Food banks are not included in the list of program use that can be assessed in a public charge determination, yet families may still fear coming to the food bank because of the fear of family separation.

Northwest Harvest believes that food is a basic human right. Our nutritious food is available to anyone in need, no questions asked, at our own SODO Community Market in Seattle and is provided free of charge to our statewide network of 375 food pantries, meal programs, and high need schools under the contractual promise that it will be distributed to anyone in need.

Northwest Harvest has also provided resources throughout our state's emergency food network to help food banks take the necessary precautions to avoid over-collection of unnecessary personal information and safeguarding any data collected.

No one should be intimidated from accessing the resources that they can lawfully use. No one should have to choose between food or their family.

¹ <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/public-charge-rule-looming-one-seven-adults-immigrant-families-reported-avoiding-public-benefit-programs-2018>

For additional information or statements on this or other public policy matters, please contact Christina Wong at christinaw@northwestharvest.org.

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About Northwest Harvest

Northwest Harvest is Washington's leading hunger relief agency – supporting a statewide network of 375 food banks, meal programs, and high-need schools. Focused on improving equity in our food system, Northwest Harvest believes everyone in Washington should have consistent access to nutritious food that feeds the body, mind, and spirit. In addition to making sure those who suffer from hunger have increased access to healthy food, Northwest Harvest aims to shift public opinion, as well as impact institutional policies and societal practices that perpetuate hunger, poverty, and disparities in our state.