Salvaging a Safety Net: Modifying the Bar to Supplemental Security Income for Legal Aliens

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 1996 Congress passed legislation designed to “end welfare as we know it.” 1 As promised, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (“PRWORA”) 2 substantially changed the system of federal, state, and local public assistance programs. Although PRWORA’s policies have affected many individuals and families, legal aliens 3 in the United States have been among the most heavily impacted. 4

1. President’s Statement on Signing the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, PUB. PAPERS 1328 (Aug. 22, 1996). “While far from perfect, this legislation provides an historic opportunity to end welfare as we know it and transform our broken welfare system by promoting the fundamental values of work, responsibility, and family.” Id.


Traditionally, two groups of aliens have been eligible for public benefits: legal immigrants and persons “permanently residing under color of law” (“PRUCOLs”). Legal immigrants, or legal permanent residents, are those who have been “lawfully accorded the privilege of residing permanently in the United States” under United States immigration laws. 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(20) (1994). The definition of PRUCOL varies between benefit programs, but generally includes individuals who have received asylum, see 8 U.S.C. § 1158 (Supp. III 1997), those who have been “paroled” into the United States at the discretion of the Attorney General, see id. § 1182(d)(5) (Supp. III 1997), and some individuals who are residing in the United States with the knowledge of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (“INS”) and whom the INS does not plan to remove. See Legomsky, supra, at 1459; see also infra note 40. In this Note, the term “legal aliens” encompasses both legal permanent residents and individuals with PRUCOL status. This Note does not address the situation of aliens unlawfully present in the United States.

4. Though legal immigrants represented only approximately 5% of the public assistance rolls nationwide, they initially absorbed 40% of the welfare cuts. See George Soros, Immigrants’ Burden, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 2, 1996, at A23; see also infra note 69. For example, initially 1,500,000 noncitizens lost their food stamps as a result of PRWORA. See Editorial, Food Is No Luxury: White House Should Seek Restoration of Aid for Legal Immigrants, L.A. TIMES, Dec. 17, 1997, at B6. PRWORA “booted 900,000 adult legal immigrants out of the food stamp program,” along with 600,000 children. Id. As many as 500,000 elderly and disabled immigrants nearly lost their Supplemental Security Income.
Before PRWORA, legal aliens generally became eligible for Supplemental Security Income ("SSI") after five years in the United States. Now, PRWORA prohibits legal immigrants who entered the United States after August 22, 1996 from accessing SSI until after they naturalize.

PRWORA also limits food stamps for legal aliens and grants states the option to deny legal aliens public benefits including Temporary Assistance to Needy Families ("TANF"), Medicaid, and other federal means-tested programs.

SSIs are unique among federal public assistance programs. It is the only program to provide a flexible cash benefit to very low income elderly, blind, before the Balanced Budget Act of 1997 provision restored the benefits. See Mercedes Olivera, Immigrant Advocates Say Changes Welcome but Incomplete, DALLAS MORNING NEWS, Nov. 26, 1997, at 28A; see also infra notes 86-90 and accompanying text. But immigrants arriving after August 22, 1996 "get nothing" if they become disabled. See infra notes 47-48 and accompanying text. For a discussion of problems related to naturalization, see infra notes 74 and 86.


9. TANF is a cash welfare block grant to the states that replaces Aid to Families with Dependent Children, the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training Program, and the Emergency Assistance Program. See STAFF OF H.R. COMM. ON WAYS AND MEANS, 104TH CONG., SUMMARY OF WELFARE REFORMS MADE BY PUBLIC LAW 104-193, THE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND WORK OPPORTUNITY RECONCILIATION ACT AND ASSOCIATED LEGISLATION 14 (Comm. Print 1996). TANF's goals are "to increase State flexibility in providing assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for at home; end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage; prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies; and encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families." See generally 79 AM. JUR. 2D Welfare Laws § 38 (1975).

10. Medicaid is a comprehensive medical assistance program. It provides medical coverage for families with dependent children, and aged, blind, and disabled individuals, including those under the SSI program, whose income is insufficient to afford necessary medical services. See 42 U.S.C. §§ 1396a-1396b, 1320a (1994 & Supp. II 1996). See generally 79 AM. JUR. 2D Welfare Laws § 38 (1975).

11. Although PRWORA does not specify the programs considered means-tested, its original incarnation, the Personal Responsibility Act, listed 61 programs as federal means-tested programs. See H.R. 3500, 103d Cong. § 601(d) (1993). The list included federal housing, community development, nutrition, employment, and utility assistance programs. See id.

12. As a federal program, SSI has provided consistent, predictable, dignified assistance to its beneficiaries. Cf. infra notes 26-29 and accompanying text (highlighting problems with earlier state administration). Thus, Congress has praised SSI's role as "a 'safety net' for low income Americans." Edward R. Roybal, Foreword to SUBCOMM. ON RETIREMENT INCOME AND EMPLOYMENT OF THE H.R. SELECT COMMITTEE ON AGING, 100TH CONG., SUPPLEMENTAL SECURITY INCOME (SSI): CURRENT PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS AND ALTERNATIVES FOR FUTURE REFORM at III (Comm. Print 1988).
and disabled individuals. SSI’s modest assistance has been essential in ensuring a minimum standard of living for this vulnerable population.

This Note examines the bar to SSI access for legal aliens. Part II

13. Because SSI is a cash supplement rather than a targeted benefit, like food stamps, housing vouchers, or Medicaid, it can be applied toward the recipient’s most pressing needs, which may vary from month to month. For example, SSI can be used for rent, home repairs, utility payments, food, medicine, or other necessities, while food stamps can only be used for food, housing vouchers only for housing, and Medicaid only for medical care.

14. The program is designed to “assure a minimum level of income to people who are aged, blind or disabled and who have limited income and resources.” HARVEY L. MCCORMICK, SOCIAL SECURITY CLAIMS AND PROCEDURES § 791, at 405 (4th ed. 1991). It provides “a small income supplement for needy adults and a flexible grant for families facing tough times.” Richard Wolf, Editorial, When Compassion and Cutbacks Collide—Tough Choices Loom over SSI Reductions, USA TODAY, Nov. 1, 1995, at 7A; see infra notes 35-36 and accompanying text. In fact, an annual income generated solely from SSI is typically 25% below the federal poverty level. See, e.g., LEATHA LAMISON-WHITE, U.S. DEPT OF COMMERCE, POVERTY IN THE UNITED STATES: 1996, at A-4 (1997). SSI “is not a luxury ... It is a lifeline.” Good News for Disabled Children, ST. PETERSBURG TIMES, Dec. 20, 1997, at 18A.

15. Rather than discussing the constitutionality of the SSI bar in detail, this Note focuses on the provision in its statutory and policy contexts. Nevertheless, a few constitutional points provide a useful background.

The Supreme Court has held that Congress has the authority to premise eligibility for public benefits on citizenship status. In Mathews v. Diaz, 426 U.S. 67 (1976), the Court held that Congress’s plenary power over immigration extends to the power to distinguish based on alienage in determining eligibility for public benefits. The three appellees in the case were resident aliens lawfully residing in the United States for less than five years who had been denied Medicare Part B. See id. at 70. Appellees challenged a federal rule that prohibited legal aliens over 65 from accessing Medicare Part B until they had resided in the United States for over five years. See id. at 70-71. The trial court held that the statute was unconstitutional under the Due Process Clause. See id. at 73. The Supreme Court, reversing, held that Congress maintained authority to distinguish between classes of aliens and citizens in distributing welfare benefits. See id. at 83. The Court noted that it was “obvious that Congress has no constitutional duty to provide all aliens with the welfare benefits provided to citizens.” Id. at 82 (emphasis omitted). The Court noted that although both aliens and citizens are protected by the Due Process Clause, numerous federal statutes (including statutes regulating federal employment, private employment, and investments by aliens) treated aliens and citizens differently. See id. at 78. The Court stated that it was “unquestionably reasonable” for Congress to premise alien eligibility for public benefits on “the character and duration of his residence.” Id. at 83. The Court also held that neither the character nor the duration of residence requirements was wholly irrational in determining alien eligibility for benefits. See id.

Although Mathews affirmed Congress’s authority to deny public benefits based on citizenship status, commentators have chronicled distinctions between the constitutional treatment of aliens on matters “inside” immigration law and on matters “outside” the laws of admission, removal, or naturalization. See T. Alexander Aleinikoff, Federal Regulation of Aliens and the Constitution, 83 AM. J. INT’L L. 862 (1989); Hiroshi Motomura, Immigration Law After a Century of Plenary Power: Phantom Constitutional Norms and Statutory Interpretation, 100 YALE L.J. 545 (1990); Michael Scaperlanda, Polishing the Tarnished Golden Door, 1993 WIS. L. REV. 965. On matters “inside” immigration law, the Supreme Court has long held that Congress maintains plenary power over immigration. See, e.g., Harisiades v. Shaughnessy, 342 U.S. 580, 596 (1952) (Frankfurter, J., concurring) (“this Court ... has recognized that the determination of a selective and exclusionary immigration policy was for the Congress, and not for the Judiciary”); Fong Yue Ting v. United States, 149 U.S. 698 (1893) (holding that power to exclude or expel aliens is vested in political departments of government). Though the Supreme Court defers significantly to Congress even on matters “outside"
discusses the history of SSI as a program benefiting the low income elderly and disabled. Additionally, Part II details the history of alien eligibility for SSI. Part III suggests that, in light of safeguards incorporated in immigration law and SSI program requirements, such a bar is unnecessary. Part IV proposes a modification to the current SSI bar which accounts for its most serious shortcomings.

II. HISTORY

A. Development of the SSI Program

In June 1934, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt called for the creation of a national social program to provide individuals with economic security against "the hazards and vicissitudes of life." In particular, the President envisioned a program to insulate individuals from poverty during unemployment and old age. Within the month, President Roosevelt established the cabinet-level Committee on Economic Security to study income security problems and to prepare recommendations for promoting

immigration law, the Court has held in a series of cases that aliens must here be accorded the same constitutional protections as citizens. See Almeida-Sanchez v. United States, 413 U.S. 266 (1973) (Fourth Amendment); Bridges v. Wixon, 326 U.S. 135, 148 (1945) (First Amendment); Wong Wing v. United States, 163 U.S. 228 (1896) (Fifth and Sixth Amendments).


16. Presidential Message to the Congress Reviewing the Broad Objectives and Accomplishments of the Administration (June 8, 1934), reprinted in STATUTORY HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES: INCOME SECURITY 63 (Robert B. Stevens ed., 1970) [hereinafter INCOME SECURITY]. President Roosevelt believed that "[f]ear and worry based on unknown danger contribute to social unrest and economic demoralization. If, as our Constitution tells us, our Federal Government was established among other things 'to promote the general welfare,' it is our plain duty to provide for that security upon which welfare depends." Id.

17. See id. Prior to the passage of the Social Security Act of 1935, states had operated their own public assistance programs to benefit the low income elderly. See DIANA M. DINITRO, SOCIAL WELFARE: POLITICS AND PUBLIC POLICY 131-32 (4th ed. 1995). As early as 1914, Arizona established a pension program for its aging population. In 1915, the territory of Alaska also established a pension program for its elderly residents. By 1935, thirty states had developed some type of assistance program for their elderly residents. See id. at 131. But during the Great Depression, some states had to default on payments to elderly residents and in others "grants were entirely inadequate." S. REP. NO. 74-628, at 5-6 (1935).
financial stability.\textsuperscript{18}

The Committee determined that any economic security program had to have as its primary goal "the assurance of an adequate income to each human being in childhood, youth, middle age, or old age—in sickness or in health."\textsuperscript{19} The Committee recommended a two-part program: a federal insurance program for retired workers and a safety net program for the needy elderly who would not benefit adequately from the insurance program.\textsuperscript{20}

The Committee's recommendations became the basis of the Social Security Act of 1935.\textsuperscript{21} The 1935 Act also created Aid to the Blind ("AB").\textsuperscript{22} In 1950 Congress added Aid to the Permanently and Totally Disabled ("APTD"), patterned after the Committee's safety net program for the elderly, known as Old Age Assistance ("OAA").\textsuperscript{23} OAA, AB, and APTD were all state-administered precursors to the current SSI program.\textsuperscript{24}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} See Executive Order Establishing the Committee on Economic Security and the Advisory Council on Economic Security (June 29, 1934), reprinted in INCOME SECURITY, supra note 16, at 64-65. The Committee on Economic Security consisted of the Secretary of Labor, the Attorney General, the Secretary of Agriculture, and the Federal Emergency Relief Administrator. See id.
\item \textsuperscript{19} REPORT TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC SECURITY (January 15, 1935), reprinted in NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON SOCIAL WELFARE, THE REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC SECURITY OF 1935 AND OTHER BASIC DOCUMENTS RELATING TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOCIAL SECURITY ACT 23 (1985). The Committee also concluded that the "one almost all-embracing measure of security is an assured income." Id.
\item \textsuperscript{20} See id. at 45-46. The Committee asserted that all individuals were entitled to a "decent subsistence in their own homes." Id. at 48. But the Committee recognized that the federal retirement program would not satisfactorily provide for all elderly persons, particularly those who had been unable to work in their younger years or those whose contributions would not entitle them to income sufficient for a "reasonable subsistence." Id. at 47-48. Congress echoed the Committee's conclusions, stating that the Social Security Act's public assistance provisions would support those individuals who had been unable to "build up adequate provisions for their old age" earlier in life. S. REP. No. 74-628, at 7 (1935).
\item \textsuperscript{22} See Pub. L. No. 74-271, § 1002, 49 Stat. 620, 645 (codified as amended at 42 U.S.C. § 1202 (1994)), repealed by Social Security Amendments of 1972, Pub. L. No. 92-603, § 303(a)-(b), 86 Stat. 1329, 1484 (repeal ineffective with respect to Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Virgin Islands). Like the Social Security Act's public assistance plan for the elderly, AB provided grants to the states to support the blind. The Senate Committee's Report noted that "[w]hile it is very desirable that the blind should be encouraged and assisted to become self-supporting, it must be recognized that many will always need assistance. Even younger blind people will frequently need help, until they have established themselves." S. REP. No. 74-628, at 22 (1935).
\item \textsuperscript{23} See Social Security Act Amendments of 1950, ch. 809, tit. III, pt. 5, sec. 351, § 1402, 64 Stat. 477, 555 (codified as amended at 42 U.S.C. § 1352 (1994)), repealed by Social Security Amendments of 1972, Pub. L. No. 42-603, § 303(a)-(b), 86 Stat. 1329, 1484 (repeal ineffective with respect to Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Virgin Islands). The House Ways and Means Committee noted that "[s]ome of the most acute economic distress in the nation is among needy persons under age 65 who have disabilities other than blindness that prevent self-support." The Committee concluded that "[t]hese unfortunate individuals should be able to get public assistance with Federal help, just as needy persons who are blind or suffering from the infirmities of old age are provided aid." H.R. REP. No. 81-1300, at 53 (1949).
\item \textsuperscript{24} Congress authorized appropriations to states for OAA, AB, and APTD pursuant to the
In 1972 Congress created SSI by nationalizing OAA, AB, and APTD as a single program under Title XVI of the Social Security Act. Congress declared three goals for the newly-formed SSI program: 1) to create a unified income assistance program; 2) to eliminate the large disparities between eligibility standards among the states; and 3) to reduce the stigma of welfare by administering the program through the Social Security Administration. Beginning in 1974, the federal government assumed full responsibility for the program’s management.

B. General Eligibility Requirements

To be eligible for SSI, an individual must meet both substantive and minimum income requirements. Currently, three groups of individuals qualify for SSI: the elderly, the blind, and the disabled.

To be considered elderly, an individual must be over age 65. To be considered blind, an individual must have vision no better than 20/200 in his or her better eye with a corrective lens or tunnel vision of 20 degrees or less in his or her better eye with a corrective lens. To be considered disabled, an individual must be unable to work because of a “medically determinable physical or mental impairment which can be expected to result in death or which has lasted or can be expected to last for a continuous period of not less than twelve months.”


27. For example, West Virginia paid its OAA recipients an average of $50 per month in 1964, while Wisconsin paid an average benefit of $111. See DiNitto, supra note 17, at 132.


29. See id. Congress hoped to enhance the efficiency of the program and to “eliminate the demeaning rules and procedures that had been part of many State-operated, public-assistance programs.” Id.

30. See DiNitto, supra note 17, at 133.

31. Additionally, an individual must be an actual resident of the United States. SSI recipients who leave the country for 30 days or more cannot receive SSI until they have been back in the United States for at least 30 days. See Barbara Samuels, Representing the Elderly Client of Modest Means with Social Security/SSI Claims, in 10TH ANNUAL ELDER LAW INSTITUTE: REPRESENTING THE ELDERLY CLIENT OF MODEST MEANS 15 (PLI Litig. & Admin. Practice Course Handbook Series No. D-263, 1998).


33. See id. § 1382c(a)(2).

34. 42 U.S.C. § 1382c(a)(3)(A) (Supp. II 1996). In addition, a disabled individual’s physical or
In addition to meeting the substantive requirements, an individual must also meet income eligibility requirements. To be income eligible, an individual must satisfy two conditions. First, monthly income, including other sources of public assistance, must total less than the standard benefit. Because SSI is a program of last resort, applicants must claim all other benefits to which they are entitled before they can qualify for SSI. Second, the value of a prescribed set of assets may not exceed fixed limits. Also, living arrangements are factored into the determination of SSI eligibility.

C. Alien Eligibility for SSI Before PRWORA

Before PRWORA, several classes of noncitizens retained eligibility for SSI. Legal permanent residents and aliens permanently residing under color of law ("PRUCOL") were eligible for SSI while in the United States.
assuming they met the program’s substantive and income requirements.

For over 100 years, however, U.S. law has prohibited immigration by any individual likely to become a public charge. Consequently, aliens with a foreseeable need for SSI prior to admission are categorically ineligible to immigrate.

The “public charge” restriction can be overcome if an individual files an affidavit of support on behalf of the immigrant. Such an affidavit states that the individual will “sponsor,” that is, be financially responsible for, the immigrant if necessary to ensure that the immigrant will not rely on public assistance. An affidavit filed for this purpose must be filed by the person petitioning for the alien’s admission.

In addition, if a sponsored alien applied for SSI after arrival, the sponsor’s
income would be "deemed" available to the alien when determining the alien's eligibility for public benefits.\textsuperscript{45} Thus, an alien is unable to meet the income requirements unless the alien's sponsor is also impoverished. Essentially, counting a sponsor's income raises the alien's income above the threshold to receive SSI. Moreover, all of the sponsor's income would be considered to be the alien's without regard to the sponsor's other financial responsibilities.\textsuperscript{46}

Before 1993 a sponsor's income was deemed available to the alien for three years.\textsuperscript{47} In 1993 Congress temporarily increased the deeming period for SSI from three to five years to finance an extension of the Emergency Unemployment Compensation program.\textsuperscript{48} The deeming period officially returned to three years in 1996,\textsuperscript{49} however, the SSI bar enacted in PRWORA has made this return virtually irrelevant.

\textbf{D. Controversy over Alien Usage of SSI}

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the number of noncitizens receiving SSI increased. Between the years of 1986 and 1993, the number of noncitizens receiving SSI grew fifteen percent annually.\textsuperscript{50} In 1982 noncitizens represented three percent of all SSI recipients; by 1993, they composed nearly twelve percent.\textsuperscript{51} Total numbers of noncitizen SSI


\textsuperscript{46} In other words, even though the sponsor's income was most likely expended on the sponsor, his or her family, the alien, and possibly other families, it was counted toward the alien's income as though 100% of the sponsor's income was available to the alien.


\textsuperscript{50} See Finance Hearings, supra note 45, at 60 (statement of Jane Ross, Director of Income Security, United States General Accounting Office).

\textsuperscript{51} See id. SSI use by immigrants is concentrated among two groups: elderly immigrants and refugees. See Judiciary Hearings, supra note 40, at 73 (statement of Michael Fix, Jeffrey S. Passel, and Wendy Zimmermann, The Urban Institute). Elderly immigrants constitute 28% of SSI recipients, but only 9% of the overall elderly population in the United States. See id. Refugees use public benefits at higher rates than U.S. citizens for several reasons: 1) refugees have left possessions and resources behind in their former home countries as they fled persecution; 2) they generally have fewer economic
recipients grew from 151,000 in 1983 to 683,000 in 1993.\textsuperscript{52}

Several factors led to the growth in noncitizen usage of SSI. First, immigrant admissions to the United States increased overall during the 1980s and 1990s.\textsuperscript{53} Specifically, admissions grew from approximately 500,000 per year in the early 1980s to 900,000 per year in 1993.\textsuperscript{54} In fact, thirty percent of the population growth of the United States in the 1980s and 1990s can be attributed to immigration.\textsuperscript{55} As overall immigration has increased, so too have the subgroups of elderly and disabled immigrants eligible for SSI.\textsuperscript{56}

Second, noncitizens are less likely than citizens to qualify for Social Security, which is based on U.S. employment history.\textsuperscript{57} As originally contemplated by Congress and the Committee on Economic Security, Social Security is the primary income source for most older adults in the United States, and in many cases, Social Security alone provides income sufficient to preclude SSI eligibility. Elderly immigrants are less likely than citizens to receive Social Security because they often have not been in the United States long enough to compile the requisite work history before retirement.\textsuperscript{58} Because they are less likely to receive Social Security, such noncitizens are more likely to be eligible for need-based SSI.\textsuperscript{59}

Third, the Social Security Administration itself had undertaken enhanced outreach efforts to individuals eligible for SSI.\textsuperscript{60} These efforts contributed to the expansion of the SSI rolls among the general public as well as among

and family ties to the United States than other immigrants; and 3) many refugees suffer from physical or mental ailments. See id. In addition, many refugees enter the United States with “disabilities that prevent their immediate entry into the workforce.” Id. at 35 (statement of Dr. Susan Martin).

\textsuperscript{52} See Finance Hearings, supra note 45 (testimony of Jane Ross).

\textsuperscript{53} See Michael E. Fix & Jeffrey S. Passel, Setting the Record Straight, PUB. WELFARE, Spring 1994, at 7.

\textsuperscript{54} See id.

\textsuperscript{55} See id.

\textsuperscript{56} See id. The population of elderly immigrants has increased more quickly than that of disabled immigrants. To this day, disabled immigrants face significant barriers to entry based on the public charge provision discussed supra note 41 and accompanying text. For a thoughtful discussion of this issue, see John F. Stanton, Note, The Immigration Laws from a Disability Perspective: Where We Were, Where We Are, Where We Should Be, 10 GEO. IMMIGR. L.J. 441 (1996).

In addition, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 permitted almost three million undocumented aliens to legalize their immigration status. See Judiciary Hearings, supra note 40, at 6 (testimony of Carolyn Colvin). Subject to income and substantive eligibility requirements, these immigrants became eligible for SSI after legalizing their status. See id.

\textsuperscript{57} See Judiciary Hearings, supra note 40, at 36 (testimony of Dr. Susan Martin).


\textsuperscript{59} See id. This is in keeping with the original intention that SSI provide support to individuals who would not benefit from Social Security. See supra note 20 and accompanying text.

\textsuperscript{60} See Judiciary Hearings, supra note 40, at 75 (statement of Michael Fix, Jeffrey S. Passel, and Wendy Zimmermann).
noncitizens. Additionally, in particular areas of the country, translator fraud may have helped unqualified aliens access SSI. Although actual increases to the SSI rolls through fraud appear minimal, the issue’s volatility drew attention to the increasing numbers of noncitizens receiving SSI.

In 1995 Congress began investigating overall growth of the SSI program. Concurrent considerations, including a desire to balance the federal budget and discernable anti-immigrant sentiment led Congress to

61. See id.
62. See id. at 78.
63. See id. In August 1995 the General Accounting Office released a report on SSI fraud that examined the issue of translator fraud. See id. at 42 & n.1 (testimony of Jane Ross). The report offered three suggestions to combat translator fraud, including adopting an agency-wide policy for eliminating translator fraud, networking with other state and local agencies to combat fraud, and using Social Security Administration interpreters for all bilingual interviews, instead of permitting the use of outside interpreters. See id. at 9-10 (statement of Carolyn Colvin).
64. See id. at 41-42 & n.1 (testimony of Jane Ross). Between 1990 and 1994, the total number of SSI recipients increased twenty percent.
65. See id. at 41-42 & n.1 (testimony of Jane Ross). Between 1990 and 1994, the total number of SSI recipients increased twenty percent.
66. Anti-immigrant activists directed most of their frustration at undocumented aliens. In 1995 California adopted Proposition 187, the “Save Our State” initiative, designed to limit the fiscal impact of undocumented aliens presently in California and to deter others from entering. See LEGOMSKY, supra note 3, at 1004. One well-known provision prohibited every public elementary and secondary school in the state from enrolling undocumented alien students. See id. Schools were required to verify the immigration status of every student, parent, or guardian, then submit the information to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (“INS”). See id. Proposition 187 also prohibited health facilities and social services receiving public funding from serving undocumented aliens in nonemergencies and required providers to verify their patients’ immigration statuses. See id. Proposition 187 also required providers to submit immigration status information to the INS. See id.
67. In League of United Latin American Citizens v. Wilson, 908 F. Supp. 755 (C.D. Cal. 1995), the court enjoined implementation of Proposition 187. The court held that California could not deny primary and secondary education to children based on immigration status. See id. at 785 (citing Plyler v. Doe, 457 U.S. 202 (1982)). The court also held that primary and secondary schools could not require proof of immigration in a child’s enrollment process. See id. at 786. Furthermore, the court held unconstitutional all parts of Proposition 187 that required government workers, including educators, to report persons suspected of being undocumented to the INS. See id. at 779.

Additionally, within a year after California’s Proposition 187, a number of states with high immigration levels filed claims against the federal government seeking reimbursement for the costs of providing services to undocumented immigrants. Arizona, California, Florida, New Jersey, New York, and Texas filed suits against the federal government seeking reimbursement for schooling, incarceration, and social services provided to undocumented aliens. See Arizona v. United States, 104 F.3d 1086 (9th Cir. 1997); California v. United States, 104 F.3d 1086 (9th Cir. 1997), cert. denied, 118 S. Ct. 44 (1997); Texas v. United States, 106 F.3d 661 (5th Cir. 1997); New Jersey v. United States, 91
examine noncitizen SSI use especially closely.

E. Welfare Reform in 1996 and 1997

The issues discussed above converged in the debate over welfare reform, resulting in significant changes to alien eligibility for public benefits. In fact, PRWORA included special findings on welfare and immigration. These special findings emphasized self-sufficiency as the cornerstone of our national immigration policy and rejected the notion that public benefits should be an incentive for immigration."
President Bill Clinton signed PRWORA into law on August 22, 1996.\textsuperscript{68} At the time of its signing, PRWORA was projected to save fifty-five billion dollars over six years, with significant savings resulting from restricting alien access to public benefits.\textsuperscript{69}

PRWORA divides aliens into two groups for the purpose of determining eligibility for public benefits: “qualified aliens” and “unqualified aliens.” Qualified aliens include aliens lawfully admitted for permanent residence, granted asylum, admitted as refugees, paroled into the United States, granted conditional entry into the United States, and those whose deportation is being withheld.\textsuperscript{70} With few exceptions, aliens who do not fall within the statutory definition of qualified aliens and who are not nonimmigrants\textsuperscript{71} or humanitarian parolees\textsuperscript{72} are unqualified aliens and are ineligible for federal, by the availability of public benefits.

\textsuperscript{7} With respect to the State authority to make determinations concerning the eligibility of qualified aliens for public benefits in this chapter, a State that chooses to follow the Federal classification in determining the eligibility of such aliens for public assistance shall be considered to have chosen the least restrictive means available for achieving the compelling governmental interest of assuring that aliens be self-reliant in accordance with national immigration policy. \textit{Id.} § 1601.

\textsuperscript{68} Though supporting other portions of PRWORA, President Clinton expressed deep disappointment over its immigrant-related provisions. “Legal immigrants and their children ... should not be penalized if they become disabled and require medical assistance through no fault of their own. Neither should they be deprived of food stamp assistance without proper procedures or due regard for individual circumstances.” \textit{President's Statement on Signing the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996}, 11 PUB. PAPERS 1329 (Aug. 22, 1996).

\textsuperscript{69} \textit{See Speaking Up for Immigrants}, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 21, 1996, at A22. The provisions affecting aliens accounted for up to 40% of the savings realized in the legislation. \textit{See Soros, supra} note 4, at A23. In August 1997, however, Congress restored SSI benefits to immigrants present in the United States as of August 22, 1996, resulting in lower actual savings. \textit{See infra} notes 86-90 and accompanying text; \textit{see also supra} note 4.

\textsuperscript{70} \textit{See} 8 U.S.C. § 1641(a)-(b) (Supp. III 1997). In addition, certain battered aliens are treated as qualified aliens for the purposes of benefit eligibility. Aliens or their children who have been “battered or subjected to extreme cruelty in the United States by a spouse or a parent, or by a member of the spouse or parent’s family residing in the same household as the alien and the spouse or parent consented to, or acquiesced in, such battery or cruelty,” and who meet certain admissions criteria are treated as qualified immigrants though they may not otherwise meet the substantive requirements to be considered qualified aliens. \textit{Id.} § 1641(c). In any event, the agency providing benefits must find a substantial connection between such battery or cruelty and the need for the benefits to be provided. \textit{See id.}

\textsuperscript{71} Classes of “nonimmigrants” include foreign students, business visitors, tourists, and others whose plans include a temporary stay of fixed duration. \textit{See} 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(15) (1994 & Supp. III 1997). For a full discussion of the categorization of nonimmigrants, see \textit{LEGOMSKY, supra} note 3, at 223-89.

\textsuperscript{72} The Attorney General may parole individuals temporarily into the United States on a case-by-case basis for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit or for other reasons deemed in the public interest. An individual paroled into the United States under this provision is not counted toward the annual immigration quotas. \textit{See} 8 U.S.C. § 1182(d)(5) (Supp. III 1997).
state, or local benefits.\textsuperscript{73}

Qualified aliens are also ineligible to receive SSI until they naturalize.\textsuperscript{74} This bar is subject to limited exceptions. First, refugees, asylees, and aliens whose deportation are withheld may access SSI during their first seven years in the United States.\textsuperscript{75} Second, lawful permanent residents who have worked forty qualifying quarters under the Social Security Act are eligible for SSI if they meet the other program requirements.\textsuperscript{76} Third, qualified aliens who are

\textsuperscript{73} See id. §§ 1611, 1621. Exceptions to the bar on federal public benefits for unqualified aliens include: emergency medical treatment; short-term, non-cash, in-kind emergency disaster relief; public health assistance for immunizations and treatment of communicable diseases; and, subject to the approval of the Attorney General, programs which 1) deliver in-kind services at the community level, 2) do not condition the provision of assistance on the individual recipient's income or resources, and 3) are necessary for the protection of life or safety. See id. §§ 1611(b)(1)(A)-(D). Additionally, unqualified aliens receiving housing, community development, or financial assistance administered by the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development on August 22, 1996 could continue to receive such benefits. See id. § 1611(b)(1)(E).

\textsuperscript{74} See id. § 1612(a)(1), (3). Aliens generally become eligible for naturalization after five years of legal permanent residence in the United States. But naturalization applications have increased from approximately 200,000 per year in 1991 to over 1.5 million in 1997. See Mike Swift, Immigrants Rushing to Citizenship: New Deportation Rules Cause Historic Surge in Citizenship, HARTFORD COURANT, Nov. 2, 1997, at A1. This has resulted in procedural delays of up to two years. See id. Furthermore, naturalization is especially difficult for older immigrants who may have difficulty learning English or studying for the civics exam. See infra note 86.

\textsuperscript{75} The SSI bar shall not apply to an alien until seven years after the date—

(I) an alien is admitted to the United States as a refugee under section 207 of the Immigration and Nationality Act [8 U.S.C. 1157];

(II) an alien is granted asylum under section 208 of such Act [8 U.S.C. 1158];

(III) an alien's deportation is withheld under section 243(h) of such Act [8 U.S.C. 1253(h)] (as in effect immediately before the effective date of section 307 of division C of Public Law 104-208) or section 241(b)(3) of such Act [8 U.S.C. 1231(b)(3)] (as amended by section 305(a) of division C of Public Law 104-208);

(IV) an alien is granted status as a Cuban and Haitian entrant (as defined in section 501(e) of the Refugee Education Assistance Act of 1980); or


\textsuperscript{76} A lawfully admitted permanent resident alien is exempt from the SSI bar who—

(I) has worked 40 qualifying quarters of coverage as defined under title II of the Social Security Act [42 U.S.C. 401 et seq.] or can be credited with such qualifying quarters as provided under section 1645 of this title, and (II) in the case of any such qualifying quarter creditable for any period beginning after December 31, 1996, did not receive any Federal means-tested public
honorably discharged veterans of the U.S. military or who are on active duty in the U.S. armed services are eligible for SSI. Spouses and unmarried dependent children of veterans or individuals on active military duty are also eligible for SSI. Noncitizens wishing to obtain food stamps are subject to similar restrictions.

Shortly after PRWORA's enactment, plaintiffs in New York filed suit against the federal government claiming that the SSI bar violated their due process rights. In Abreu v. United States, legal permanent residents living in the United States on August 22, 1996 who were receiving or eligible for SSI argued that the SSI bar improperly discriminated between citizens and legal permanent residents under the Due Process Clause of the Fifth Amendment. The court reviewed these claims under a rational basis standard. The court found a legitimate government interest in encouraging naturalization, promoting self-sufficiency, generating fiscal savings, and removing an incentive for immigration. The court held the SSI bar constitutional, reasoning that Congress rationally could have concluded that the bar would serve the legitimate government interests. At least two other

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77. The SSI bar does not apply to an alien who is lawfully residing in any state and who is—
(i) a veteran (as defined in section 101, 1101, or 1301, or as described in section 107 of title 38) with a discharge characterized as an honorable discharge and not on account of alienage and who fulfills the minimum active-duty service requirements of section 5303A(d) of title 38,
(ii) on active duty (other than active duty for training) in the Armed Forces of the United States, or
(iii) the spouse or unmarried dependent child of an individual described in clause (i) or (ii) or the unremarried surviving spouse of an individual described in clause (i) or (ii) who is deceased if the marriage fulfills the requirements of section 1304 of title 38.


80. See id. at 806.
81. See id. at 815. The court's analysis closely examined Mathews v. Dias, 426 U.S. 67 (1976), regarding the level of scrutiny to be applied to enactments premising public assistance eligibility on citizenship status. See supra note 15.
82. See Abreu, 971 F. Supp. at 816-19.
83. See id. at 819-21.
courts are in accord. 84

Congress modified the SSI bar in the Balanced Budget Act of 1997. 85 First, Congress permitted aliens receiving SSI as of August 22, 1996 to retain their SSI benefits. 86 In addition, Congress permitted qualified aliens residing in the United States on August 22, 1996 to retain eligibility for SSI if they later acquire it. 87 As mentioned previously, asylees, refugees, and aliens whose deportation has been withheld are eligible for SSI for the first seven years they are in the United States. 88 Originally under PRWORA, this period was only five years. 89 The Budget Reconciliation Act extended the SSI eligibility period from five to seven years for refugees, asylees, and aliens whose deportation had been withheld. 90

84. In Rodriguez v. United States, 983 F. Supp. 1445 (S.D. Fla. 1997), elderly, blind, and disabled legal aliens brought suit against the federal government for a violation of their equal protection rights under the Fifth Amendment. See id. at 1447. As in Abreu, the court evaluated the SSI bar under rational basis review. See id. at 1457. Applying an analysis identical to that employed in Abreu, the Rodriguez court likewise held the SSI bar constitutional. See id. at 1458; see also Kiev v. Glickman, 991 F. Supp. 1090 (D. Minn. 1998) (holding food stamps bar constitutional under same rationale).

In addition to their constitutional claims, plaintiffs in both Abreu and Rodriguez challenged retroactive application of the SSI bar to noncitizens already residing in the United States on August 22, 1996 under the Administrative Procedures Act. See Abreu, 971 F. Supp. at 821; Rodriguez, 983 F. Supp. at 1458. The Abreu court granted a preliminary injunction enjoining implementation of the bar on this ground. See 971 F. Supp. at 825-26. The Rodriguez court denied the government’s motion to dismiss the plaintiffs’ claims relating to retroactivity. See 983 F. Supp. at 1463. Congress eliminated retroactive application of the bar in the 1997 Budget Reconciliation Act. See infra notes 85-87 and accompanying text.


86. See id. § 5301, 111 Stat. at 597 (codified as amended at 8 U.S.C. § 1612(a)(2)(E) (Supp. III 1997)). The House of Representatives noted that the purpose of the change was to “smooth the transition [to loss of food stamps, which were later reinstated for some legal aliens] for those who were already receiving [cash] benefits.” H.R. REP. No. 105-149, at 1184 (1997). One newspaper had reported on the pressure faced by Congress, caused by images of elderly immigrants “struggling to learn English to pass the citizenship examination while battling poor health.” Leonel Sanchez, The Welfare of Immigrants: Confusion Over Aid Cut-Off Grows, SAN DIEGO UNION TRIB., July 21, 1997, at B-1.

Reinstatement of benefits was a source of tremendous relief to aliens receiving SSI. Immigration advocates reported stories of despair and even suicide among aliens who feared losing SSI, their sole source of support. In most cases, the immigrants feared becoming a burden on their relatives. See Karen McAllister, No Welfare, No Hope, FRESNO BEE, Oct. 26, 1997, at A1. Local legal aid offices were flooded with requests for information on naturalization. See Arthur C. Helton, Indigent Aliens Face Welfare Cuts, Deportation, NAT’L L.J., Aug. 18, 1997, at C13.


88. See supra note 72 and accompanying text.


90. See Pub. L. No. 105-33, § 5302, 111 Stat. 251, 598 (codified as amended at 8 U.S.C. § 1612(a)(2)(A) (Supp. III 1997)); see also supra note 72. The original five-year exemption was designed to allow refugees and asylees the opportunity to adjust to living in the United States. See
Qualified aliens generally become eligible for other means-tested federal benefits after five years in the United States. For designated means-tested federal benefits, including TANF, Medicaid, and social services block grant programs, states determine alien eligibility. Although states may extend

H.R. REP. NO. 105-149, at 1182-83 (1997). Because of delays in adjusting to permanent resident status and increasing delays in the naturalization process, however, under the five-year exemption, many aliens would lose SSI and other welfare benefits “despite their attempting to naturalize at their earliest opportunity.” Id. Extending the exemption to seven years from five years gives noncitizens “more time to naturalize while continuing to receive welfare benefits without interruption.” Id.

91. See 8 U.S.C. § 1613(a) (Supp. III 1997). Some exceptions apply, however. See id. § 1613(b). Federal agencies are currently determining which federal programs will be considered “federal means-tested public benefits.” See Claudia Kolker, Area Agencies Weigh Effects of Immigration, Aid Reforms, Houston Chron., Dec. 30, 1997, at 17. Still under consideration are “many ‘gray area’ programs,” including public health center funding, Community Development block grants, and Maternal and Child Health block grants. Id. Currently, the federal government only enforces the provision on programs administered by government agencies, including primarily TANF and Medicaid. See id.

Congress listed eleven assistance programs as exceptions to the five-year restriction on federal means-tested public benefits:

(A) Medical assistance described in section 1611(b)(1)(A) of this title [emergency medical services].
(B) Short-term, non-cash, in-kind emergency disaster relief.
(C) Assistance or benefits under the National School Lunch Act [42 U.S.C. 1751 et seq.].
(D) Assistance or benefits under the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 [42 U.S.C. 1771 et seq.].
(E) Public health assistance (not including any assistance under title XIX of the Social Security Act [42 U.S.C. 1396 et seq.]) for immunizations with respect to immunizable diseases and for testing and treatment of symptoms of communicable diseases whether or not such symptoms are caused by a communicable disease.
(F) Payments for foster care and adoption assistance under parts B and E of title IV of the Social Security Act [42 U.S.C. 620 et seq. and 670 et seq.] for a parent or a child who would, in the absence of subsection (a) of this section, be eligible to have such payments made on the child's behalf under such part, but only if the foster or adoptive parent (or parents) of such child is a qualified alien (as defined in section 1641 of this title).
(G) Programs, services, or assistance (such as soup kitchens, crisis counseling and intervention, and short-term shelter) specified by the Attorney General, in the Attorney General's sole and unreviewable discretion after consultation with appropriate Federal agencies and departments, which (i) deliver in-kind services at the community level, including through public or private nonprofit agencies; (ii) do not condition the provision of assistance, the amount of assistance provided, or the cost of assistance provided on the individual recipient's income or resources; and (iii) are necessary for the protection of life or safety.
(J) Benefits under the Head Start Act [42 U.S.C. 9831 et seq.].
(K) Benefits under the Job Training Partnership Act [29 U.S.C. 1501 et seq.]


92. Social services block grant programs are state-administered social service programs, such as child care or nutrition programs, which are supported through block grants from the federal government under subchapter XX of the Social Security Act. See 42 U.S.C. §§ 1397-1397f (1994 &
the period during which aliens are ineligible for TANF, Medicaid, and the social services block grant programs, they may not reduce the period of ineligibility to less than five years.94

III. THE SSI BAR IN PRWORA IS UNNECESSARY

Even with the 1997 changes, the SSI bar is unnecessarily harsh. The current bar penalizes immigrants and families when the unforeseeable happens: the alien becomes disabled, the sponsor loses a job, or the sponsor or immigrant has a family emergency that depletes income and savings.95 The SSI bar has limited exceptions that leave little room to account for extreme situations.96 For example, aliens in the following hypothetical situations would be unable to receive SSI, even though they would meet the program’s eligibility criteria and had affirmatively demonstrated at admission that they were unlikely to become public charges.97

W.S., a healthy immigrant, receives a visa to come to the United States to work for a large corporation in December 1996. Two years after arrival, W.S. is seriously injured in a car accident and becomes permanently disabled. Now, W.S. no longer has a source of income, and because W.S. arrived on an employment visa, he may have no sponsor.98 W.S. is not yet eligible to

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93. See 8 U.S.C. § 1612(b). Under this section, qualified aliens would be barred from receiving all federal means-tested benefits, including TANF, Medicaid, and programs under the Social Services block grant program, for their first five years in the United States. See STAFF OF H.R. COMM. ON WAYS AND MEANS, 104TH CONG., SUMMARY OF WELFARE REFORMS MADE BY PUBLIC LAW 104-193, THE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND WORK OPPORTUNITY RECONCILIATION ACT AND ASSOCIATED LEGISLATION 34 (Comm. Print 1996). After the first five years, qualified aliens would remain subject to other limitations, including the state option to bar access to TANF, Medicaid, and Social Services block grant programs and sponsor to alien deeming. See id.

94. Carolyn Colvin, Deputy Commissioner for Programs, Policy, Evaluation and Communications of the Social Security Administration, expressed the concerns of the Clinton Administration, “A problem with an outright ban on SSI eligibility for sponsored immigrants for a specified number of years is that it would not be sufficiently flexible to help immigrants when they become disabled or the sponsor can no longer provide support.” Judiciary Hearings, supra note 40, at 8. See generally Leslie P. Francis, Elderly Immigrants: What Should They Expect of the Social Safety Net?, 5 ELDER L.J. 229 (1997) (arguing that PRWORA is uncompassionate and unfair to elderly immigrants).

95. The vast majority of immigrants arriving after August 22, 1996 would be subject to the SSI bar for at least their first 40 quarters after their arrival, if not for longer. See supra notes 74-77 and accompanying text.

96. For a description of the public charge provision, see supra notes 41-44 and accompanying text.

97. Section 1183a(f)(4) requires the relative of an applicant for an employment-based visa to submit an affidavit of support if such relative filed the petition or has a significant ownership interest in the petitioning organization. See 8 U.S.C. § 1183a(f)(4) (Supp. III 1997).
naturalize and did not have a chance to work forty quarters before his accident.

G.M., a seventy-five year old grandparent, is brought over to the United States by her daughter D.M. in April 1997 to live with her and provide child care for D.M.'s children while D.M. works. D.M. signs an affidavit of support on behalf of G.M. One year after G.M.'s arrival in the United States, D.M. loses her job during a regional recession. D.M. is eligible to receive TANF for her children but no longer has the ability to support G.M. as well as herself, and TANF does not meet all of the children's needs. At age seventy-five, with limited English language skills, G.M. is unable to work outside the home.

Modifying the SSI bar does not preclude Congress from encouraging self-sufficiency among aliens and eliminating public benefits as an incentive to immigrate. First, immigration law strongly discourages alien use of public assistance through a system of deterrents. Second, SSI regulations limit eligibility to individuals who meet stringent substantive and income requirements, and then the program provides barely subsistence-level income. Third, public policy indicates that the current bar undermines national interests and values apart from self-sufficiency and eliminating immigration incentives.

A. Immigration Law Deters Use of Public Benefits by Noncitizens

The SSI bar in its present form is duplicative. Provisions enacted in PRWORA and others already included in the Immigration and Nationality Act ("INA") achieve substantially similar results to the SSI bar without completely eliminating the SSI safety net. These provisions are restraints that ensure that only the neediest of aliens access public benefits.

First, under the INA, aliens must meet the requirement that they are unlikely to become a public charge before they will be admitted to the United States. The public charge exclusion is the "single most common

99. See supra note 67.
100. See 8 U.S.C. § 1182(a)(4). The Attorney General or consular officer must consider the alien's age, health, family status, financial status, education, and skills when assessing the likelihood that an alien will become a public charge. See id. § 1182(a)(4)(B).

In addition, the Attorney General or consular officer may consider an affidavit of support when making such a determination. See id. Factors used to value an affidavit include the motivation of the sponsor, the sponsor's relationship to the applicant, and the sponsor's financial ability to provide the promised support. See LEGOMSKY, supra note 3, at 316 (citing State Department Foreign Affairs Manual, 9 F.A.M. § 40.41 n.6.2 (1993)). Thus, aliens who appear likely to request benefits in spite of a sponsor's affidavit may be screened out during the admission process.
affirmative, substantive basis for denials of immigrant visas."\textsuperscript{101}

In addition, becoming a public charge within five years after admission is a ground for deportation. To avoid deportation, aliens must affirmatively show that the reason they became a public charge arose after admission to the United States.\textsuperscript{102} Therefore, aliens may be unlikely to accept benefits other than in dire situations.

Second, affidavits of support filed by sponsors are now legally binding.\textsuperscript{103} Making an affidavit legally enforceable against a sponsor obligates the government to request reimbursement from the sponsor for an alien's public benefits use.\textsuperscript{104} If the sponsor does not repay the government for the cost of benefits, then the government can sue the sponsor to recoup past expenditures on the alien.

In addition, PRWORA tightened the requirements for executing affidavits of support. With limited exceptions, only persons sponsoring the alien are allowed to execute an affidavit of support.\textsuperscript{105} Furthermore, a sponsor's income must now be at least 125% of the poverty level for a family size, which includes the sponsor's family and the alien.\textsuperscript{106} Where the sponsor's


\textsuperscript{102} "Any alien who, within five years after the date of entry, has become a public charge from causes not affirmatively shown to have arisen since entry is deportable." \textit{8 U.S.C. \$ 1227(a)(5) (Supp. II 1997)}.

\textsuperscript{103} See \textit{id. \$ 1183a}. Section 1183a prescribes that affidavits of support must be legally binding and also places restrictions on who could execute an affidavit on behalf of a potential immigrant. Specifically, affidavits of support must be contracts "legally enforceable against the sponsor by the sponsored alien, the Federal Government, any State (or any political subdivision of such State), or by any other entity which provides any means-tested public benefit." \textit{Id. \$ 1183a(1)(B)}. Before the 1996 amendments to section 1183a, the legal enforceability of affidavits of support was questionable. \textit{See Judiciary Hearings, supra note 40, at 37 (testimony of Dr. Susan Martin)}.

\textsuperscript{104} \textit{8 U.S.C. \$ 1183a(1)(A) provides that}\n
Upon notification that a sponsored alien has received any means-tested public benefit, the appropriate nongovernmental entity which provided such benefit or the appropriate entity of the Federal Government, a State, or any political subdivision of a State shall request reimbursement by the sponsor in an amount which is equal to the unreimbursed costs of such benefit. \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{105} See \textit{8 U.S.C. \$ 1183a(1)} (Supp. III 1997). Other family members or individuals, even if willing and capable, are not permitted to execute the affidavits of support. They may, however, be joint sponsors with the petitioning family member. Joint sponsors incur the same liability as petitioning sponsors. See \textit{id. \$ 1183a(2), (5)}.

\textsuperscript{106} See \textit{id. \$ 1183a(1)(E)}. A sponsor's qualifying income must be demonstrated by "provision of a certified copy of the individual's Federal income tax return for the individual's 3 most recent taxable years and a written statement, executed under oath or as permitted under penalty of perjury . . . , that the copies are certified copies of such returns." \textit{Id. \$ 1183a(6)(A)(i)}. Significant assets of the sponsor or sponsored alien may also be used to demonstrate the means to maintain income, if such assets are available for the support of a sponsored alien. \textit{See id. \$ 1183a(6)(A)(ii)}.

These provisions have been met with substantial concern by immigration advocates. For example,
income does not meet this requirement, other persons are allowed to be jointly and severally liable with the petitioner.\textsuperscript{107} A sponsor must be a United States national or legal permanent resident and must be over age eighteen.\textsuperscript{108} A sponsor who meets these qualifications is obligated to support the alien for forty quarters after the alien receives public benefits or until the alien naturalizes.\textsuperscript{109}

Legally binding affidavits of support significantly reduce the likelihood that the government will have to make unreimbursed payments to aliens in emergency situations. Because federal, state, and local governments can seek reimbursement from sponsors, the governments now have a direct route to collection of amounts spent on public benefits for noncitizens.\textsuperscript{110} The statute also authorizes the use of collection agencies in recouping government expenditures on unauthorized benefits paid to aliens.\textsuperscript{111}

Moreover, if an alien applies for and receives public benefits, the alien now creates financial liability for the sponsor. Notably, under the changes made by PRWORA, the sponsor will often be the person who petitioned for the alien's immigration and most likely a close family member: a parent, child, or spouse.\textsuperscript{112} The likelihood of causing financial liability to a close family member would seem to serve as a meaningful deterrent to aliens attempting to access SSI in anything but the most desperate of situations.\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{108} See id. § 1183a(f)(1)(A), (B).
\textsuperscript{109} See id. § 1183a(a)(2). After December 31, 1996, such quarters do not include any quarter in which the alien received any federal means-tested benefit. See id. at (a)(3)(A).
\textsuperscript{110} See supra note 108. In addition, a sponsor must notify the Attorney General and the State in which the alien resides of any change in the sponsor's address. See 8 U.S.C. § 1183a(d)(1). Notification must be made within 30 days of any change during the time that the affidavit remains enforceable. See id. Failure to comply may result in a fine ranging from $250 to $5,000. See id. § 1183a(d). This ensures that governments will be able to find sponsors if governments need to seek reimbursement.
\textsuperscript{111} See 8 U.S.C. § 1183a(b)(3). Remedies available to enforce an affidavit of support include property liens, ordered installment payments, garnishment, orders for specific performance, and payment of legal fees and other costs of collection. See id. § 1183(c).
\textsuperscript{112} See supra note 105 and accompanying text.
\textsuperscript{113} In fact, in light of the recent changes, legal practitioners have propounded only cautious use of affidavits of support to satisfy the public charge exclusion. In particular, practitioners have
B. SSI Regulations Prevent Assistance to Unqualified Applicants

SSI requirements provide a second set of safeguards against unnecessary SSI use by aliens. If PRWORA's restrictions on noncitizen access to SSI did not exist, aliens would still be subject to income and substantive eligibility requirements before receiving benefits. First, applicants must demonstrate that they are substantively eligible for SSI by confirming that they are either over the age of sixty-five, legally blind, or disabled. Candidates applying for SSI based on a disability must also demonstrate that their disability prevents them from working. Medical, professional, and other evaluations are required to establish substantive eligibility. Some commentators believe that recent publicity about potential SSI fraud has led to overenforcement of substantive disability requirements.

expressed concern over sponsor liability for an alien's use of Medicaid. In cases where an alien's medical problems are serious or noninsurable, "the amount of liability could be astronomical. For this reason, affidavits of support should be responsibly used mainly for spouses, parents and children." Ronald H. Bonaparte, Planning Immigration Through the Quota System and the New Contractual Affidavit of Support, in 29TH ANNUAL IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION INSTITUTE 323 (PLI Corp. Law & Practice Course Handbook Series No. B-964, 1996).

114. Some scholars support allowing noncitizens to access SSI to the same extent as citizens. These commentators believe that by virtue of their admission for permanent residence, legal immigrants possess characteristics favorable to lasting membership in our society. See Legomsky, supra note 3, at 1466-67. "They have become at least close to being 'our own,' and they plan to stay. We should therefore care for them in much the same way that we care for our citizen residents." Id. Furthermore, to the extent that public benefits can be considered "a way station for riding out temporary storms, thus preserving human capital for future investment," it is in society's best interests that immigrants, like citizens, survive these storms to thrive and prosper. Id. at 1464-65. But see Wolf, supra note 14, at 7A (quoting Rep. Clay Shaw, "When you're cutting back, take care of your own citizens first.").

115. See supra notes 32-34 and accompanying text.

116. See 42 U.S.C. § 1382c(a)(3)(B) (1994). To be considered disabled, an individual's physical or mental impairment or impairments must be of such severity that the individual is not only unable to do his or her previous work, but cannot, considering the individual's age, education, and work experience, engage in any other kind of substantial gainful work. See id.; see also Berry v. Schweiker, 675 F.2d 464 (2d Cir. 1982). The impairment or impairments must "significantly limit[ ]" the applicant's physical or mental ability to do basic work activities. 20 C.F.R. § 416.920(c) (1998); see Almonte v. Califano, 490 F. Supp. 127 (S.D.N.Y. 1980) ("proving existence of one or more impairments does not, without more, establish 'disability'")). An individual who is working and whose work constitutes "substantial gainful activity" will not be considered disabled. 20 C.F.R. § 416.920(b).

117. See Males v. Sullivan, 726 F. Supp. 315 (D.D.C. 1989) (factors assessed include medical data and findings, expert medical opinion, subjective complaints, and claimant's age, education, and work history); Rivera v. Harris, 623 F.2d 212 (N.Y. 1980) (factors to be considered are objective medical facts, diagnoses or medical opinions based on such facts, subjective evidence of pain or disability). But see Baxter v. Schweiker, 538 F. Supp. 343, 351 (N.D. Ga. 1982) (noting that "mere presence of medical problems does not constitute disability in a supplemental security income case as there must also be disabling effects").

118. In one recent case, 181 of 300 individuals spanning four generations of a Georgia family received SSI disability benefits. See Editorial, Fraud Case Illustrates Need for Agencies To Be Diligent, ATLANTA J. & ATLANTA CONST., Jan. 8, 1998, at A14. This discovery has prompted
Second, an applicant’s income must fall below a prescribed level. Most notably, sponsor-to-alien deeming provisions for SSI ensure that only the neediest aliens would be eligible for benefits. By deeming the sponsor’s income available to the alien, the only aliens to qualify substantively for SSI would be those whose own income added to that of their sponsors’ totaled less than $494 per month—the threshold amount for any individual. Both earned and unearned income count toward determining income eligibility. SSI payments then make up the difference between the applicant’s prebenefit income and the maximum monthly income level.

Third, the Social Security Administration periodically reviews eligibility determinations to ensure that a recipient’s income and substantive eligibility
still meet SSI guidelines. Benefit adjustments are made following these periodic reviews. Thus, SSI benefits are limited to those with current, ongoing need.

C. Public Policy Requires that the SSI Bar Be Modified

Public policy supports making SSI available to noncitizens under certain circumstances. First, the harshness of the bar undermines family reunification, one of the primary goals of the U.S. immigration system. Potential sponsors may be deterred from petitioning to bring their family members to the United States knowing that there is no safety net to protect them in times of emergency.

Second, aliens as a group contribute significantly to the federal economy that finances SSI. Aliens disproportionately create jobs and help revitalize depressed neighborhoods through entrepreneurship. Moreover, aliens pay more in taxes than they use in benefits. As a group, they are only slightly more likely than U.S. citizens to utilize public benefits. Consequently,
aliens are denied benefits to which their taxes have contributed. Third, conditioning SSI eligibility on citizenship cheapens the concept of naturalization. Although the majority of individuals who naturalize do so out of a desire to join the American polity and to show their allegiance to the United States, aliens may now be inclined to naturalize out a fear of being ineligible for benefits.131

Finally, the history and purpose of SSI direct that the program help alleviate poverty among the elderly, blind, and disabled.132 Poverty is at its most compelling when it is the result of unforeseeable or tragic circumstances. To deny the safety net of SSI to the truly needy beset by dire circumstances, regardless of citizenship status, is contrary to the purpose of SSI and contrary to public policy.133

IV. PROPOSAL

Judicial invalidation of the SSI bar appears unlikely. Several courts have already upheld the bar’s constitutionality.134 Additionally, courts have been receptive only to administrative challenges relating to retroactive application of the bar, which is no longer at issue.135 In contrast, Congress demonstrated its willingness to revisit PRWORA with the 1997 Budget Reconciliation Act136 and the Agricultural Research, Extension, and Education Reform Act of 1998.137 Consequently, statutory amendment presents the most viable means through which to modify the SSI bar.
A. Amendment to Current Legislation

In order to permit truly needy noncitizens to access SSI, two amendments to PRWORA are required. First, Congress should remove SSI from its list of "Specified Federal Programs" that are barred to noncitizens. That would still subject potential SSI recipient's to the five-year restriction on noncitizen use of federal means-tested benefits, however. Therefore, Congress should also exclude SSI from the five-year restriction on noncitizen use of federal means-tested public benefits.

Congress should amend 8 U.S.C. § 1613 as follows:

Five-year limited eligibility of qualified aliens for federal means-tested public benefit

a) In general

Notwithstanding any other provision of law and except as provided in subsections (b), (c), and (d) of this section, an alien who is a qualified alien (as defined in section 1641 of this title) and who enters the United States on or after August 22, 1996 is not eligible for federal means-tested public benefits for a period of five years beginning on the date of the alien's entry into the United States within the meaning of the term "qualified alien."

...c) Application of term federal means-tested public benefit

(1) The limitation under subsection (a) of this section shall not apply to assistance or benefits under paragraph (2).

(2) Assistance and benefits under this paragraph are as follows:

(E) Benefits under the Supplemental Security Income Program [18 U.S.C. 1381 et seq.], provided that:

(i) In the case of an alien sponsored under 8 U.S.C. § 1183a, the alien's income, including income deemed from a sponsor or sponsors, falls below the income eligibility level for SSI; or

(ii) In the case of an unsponsored alien, the condition qualifying the alien for SSI arose after the alien's entrance into the United States.

138. Although this Note focuses on restoring SSI eligibility for legal aliens, similar amendments could restore food stamp eligibility to these noncitizens. Other amendments, based on comparable reasoning, could restore TANF and Medicaid.


140. As a federally-administered program that assesses a prospective recipient's income to determine eligibility, SSI would be considered a means-tested federal benefit. See supra note 91 and accompanying text.


142. For the current text of this subsection, see supra note 91.
These changes will remove durational bars on SSI for legal aliens. But substantive eligibility criteria remain, as do sponsor-to-alien deeming provisions.\textsuperscript{143}

B. Application

1. W.S., an Un sponsored Immigrant Who Is Now Permanently Disabled

As noted in Part III, immigrant W.S. would be ineligible for SSI under the current system. Though meeting the substantive and income requirements for SSI,\textsuperscript{144} PRWORA’s bar would prevent W.S. from receiving SSI because he would not fit within the statute’s limited exceptions.\textsuperscript{145}

Under the proposed amendment, however, W.S. would be eligible for SSI. As an unsponsored alien, his SSI eligibility would depend upon whether his disability arose before or after his arrival in the United States.\textsuperscript{146} In W.S.’s case, the disability which prevents him from working arose from injuries received in an accident two years after arriving in the United States. This disability led to loss of income, which also created financial eligibility for SSI. Without a bar or time limitation on legal alien access, W.S. would be eligible to receive SSI.

This result is justifiable because aliens who are admitted to the United States without sponsors previously demonstrated their capacity to support themselves. W.S. satisfied the screening mechanisms in the Immigration and Nationality Act that indicate financial self-sufficiency.\textsuperscript{147} Consequently,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{143} See 8 U.S.C. § 1631(a)-(b). Notably, the sponsor-to-alien deeming provisions enacted in PRWORA contain an indigence exception. Under this exception, if an agency administering a federal means-tested benefit determines that the noncitizen “in the absence of the assistance provided by the agency, [would] be unable to obtain food and shelter,” even after taking the sponsor’s income and other contributions to the noncitizen into account, then the sponsor’s income deemed to the alien will only include the amount actually provided to the alien for the following 12 months. \textit{Id.} § 1631(e). This allows an alien so situated to meet the substantive eligibility requirements for federal means-tested programs. Currently, because SSI is a “specified federal program” under 8 U.S.C. § 1612 rather than a “Federal means-tested public benefits program” under 8 U.S.C. § 1613, the indigence exception does not apply to SSI. \textit{Id.} § 1631(a). Moreover, the exception makes no provision for indigent unsponsored aliens, and does not suggest whether benefits could continue beyond 12 months to an alien whose sponsor remains impoverished.

  \item \textsuperscript{144} See Part II.B.

  \item \textsuperscript{145} See \textit{supra} notes 74-78 and accompanying text.

  \item \textsuperscript{146} If W.S.’s inability to work arose before his arrival in the United States, he would be ineligible for SSI and could also be deported as a public charge if he applied for public benefits. See \textit{supra} notes 101-02 and accompanying text.

  \item \textsuperscript{147} Under the public charge provision, W.S. affirmatively demonstrated prior to admission that he was unlikely to become a public charge. In fact, W.S.’s plight is all the more dramatic in light of his employment-based admissions status. Under the employment-based immigration program, a company
\end{itemize}
W.S.'s receipt of SSI is appropriately in keeping with SSI's purpose of supporting individuals with no other means of support.148

2. G.M., a Sponsored Immigrant Whose Sponsor Loses Her Job

As noted in Part III, G.M. would also be ineligible for SSI under the current system. Although G.M. would meet the substantive criteria for old age assistance under SSI, the current bar prevents G.M. from receiving such assistance.149

Under the proposed amendment, G.M. could receive SSI, at least for a limited period. In this case, G.M.'s need for SSI is precipitated not by her own disability but by her sponsor's financial crisis.150 As a sponsored alien, G.M.'s eligibility for SSI would depend on her personal income combined with that of her sponsor, D.M. G.M. then could receive SSI for as long as this combined income fell below the income eligibility level for SSI.

This result is justifiable because PRWORA's sponsorship and deeming provisions require that sponsors demonstrate ability and intent to support their sponsored aliens before the aliens are admitted to the United States. For example, under PRWORA's provisions, D.M. had to execute a legally-binding affidavit indicating that she would support G.M.151 D.M. also had to establish her ability to support G.M. by demonstrating that her income was at least 125% of the poverty level.152 In addition, the government is entitled to

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must petition on behalf of the immigrant for the immigrant's visa. Therefore, a company found W.S.'s skills so valuable that it undertook the visa process on his behalf. See generally LEGOMSKY, supra note 3, at 171-204 (describing employment-based visa system). Note, however, that where a relative of an immigrant is also a substantial owner of a petitioning company, such owner's income is deemed available to the immigrant. See supra note 98.

148. See supra note 23. SSI's income eligibility requirements would prevent W.S. from accessing SSI if he had any sources of support that would raise his income above the threshold eligibility level. For example, if W.S. had a working spouse, her income would be deemed available to W.S. under SSI regulations, most likely making him ineligible for SSI payments. See 20 C.F.R. § 416.1168 (1998). Similarly, if another person residing in W.S.'s household had responsibility for W.S.'s care, then that person's income would also be deemed to W.S in determining his eligibility. See id.

149. See supra notes 74-78 and accompanying text.

150. In creating old age assistance, Congress assumed that, due to effects of the aging process, individuals beyond a certain age should not be expected to work outside the home (though many do). See DIETTO, supra note 17, at 134.

151. Normally, a sponsor is obligated to support the sponsored immigrant until the immigrant has worked 40 qualifying quarters under the Social Security system. See 8 U.S.C. § 1183a(a) (Supp. III 1997). But as G.M. is 75 and baby-sits her grandchildren for D.M., it is unlikely that D.M. ever expected G.M. practically to work 40 qualifying quarters. Consequently, D.M.'s responsibility for G.M. extends until either G.M. naturalizes or for the duration of G.M.'s life. See supra notes 74 and 86.

152. See 8 U.S.C. § 1183a(b) (Supp. III 1997); see also supra note 106.
seek reimbursement from D.M. for the cost of G.M.'s SSI. 153 Permitting G.M. to temporarily receive SSI while D.M. is unable to support her and then later seeking reimbursement from D.M. ensures that G.M.'s immediate needs are met and that D.M. upholds her obligation as a sponsor. 154

C. Procedural Reinforcements To Ensure Integrity of the SSI Program

To enhance effectiveness, procedural reinforcements should accompany the proposed amendment to SSI. 155 First, the INS should undertake careful screening of sponsors to ensure that each sponsor can meet the statutory requirement of support. 156 Second, the Social Security Administration should enforce measures in the SSI application process designed to determine whether, in the case of an unsponsored alien, the alien’s disability arose after entry; or, in the case of a sponsored alien, that the sponsor is truly indigent based on factors arising after the alien’s admission to the United States. Third, the Social Security Administration should regularly reevaluate sponsors’ income throughout an alien’s receipt of SSI to affirm that aliens are not receiving SSI while their sponsors are able to support them. 157 Similarly, the Social Security Administration should make regular disability redeterminations for aliens receiving SSI based on disability. 158

V. CONCLUSION

In light of its purpose as a safety net, SSI should not be barred absolutely for most legal aliens. Current restrictions in immigration law will deter all but the most indigent noncitizens from seeking SSI benefits. In addition, income and substantive eligibility requirements in the SSI program prevent individuals who do not meet the program’s standard of neediness from receiving benefits. Furthermore, the bar does not realistically account for

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153. See 8 U.S.C. § 1183a(b). Though beyond the scope of this Note, additional statutory changes might provide a sponsor who has suffered a financial crisis the opportunity to reverse his fortunes before reimbursement proceedings are brought against him for benefits used by the sponsored alien. This would be particularly beneficial when a sponsor would be unable to immediately repay the government should proceedings be brought at the first opportunity.

154. But see supra note 106 for criticisms of the new sponsorship system.

155. The following preventive measures emphasize the importance of enforcing safeguards already included in SSI and immigration law. The Social Security Administration should consistently uphold these standards, thereby decreasing the risk of fraud and abuse.

156. See supra notes 103-09 and accompanying text.

157. Reevaluation of a sponsor’s income could occur during regularly-scheduled redeterminations of eligibility, or at any other interval of time. See supra notes 125-26 and accompanying text.

158. This will help ensure that substantive eligibility requirements act as a safeguard against unnecessary use by both aliens and citizens. See supra notes 118, 125-26 and accompanying text.
emergencies and unforeseeable situations which safety net programs like SSI were designed to address.\textsuperscript{159} Thus, Congress should act to modify the SSI bar and amend 8 U.S.C. § 1612(a)(3)(A) and 8 U.S.C. § 1613(c)(2).

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\textsuperscript{159} See _supra_ notes 16-21, 96-99 and accompanying text.