



Words that Work on Public Charge

Opinion Research Insights for
Outreach to Immigrant Families

On behalf of the Protecting Immigrant Families Coalition and with support from No Kid Hungry, Barreto Segura Partners (BSP) Research conducted a comprehensive research project including a large survey (n=1,000 conducted September 2021) and eight focus groups of Latino, AAPI and Black immigrants and individuals who live in mixed status families (conducted in July of 2022). The study closely examined:

- Perceptions on changes to the public charge rule
- Trusted messages
- Effective outreach messaging

This guide recommends research-informed language to use when speaking with families about public charge.

PERCEPTION / AWARENESS

Knowledge regarding the public charge policy is low therefore outreach can make a difference. Our research found that most people in immigrant families are not familiar with the term “public charge,” and even those who have heard about the public charge rule lack context. However, once the policy is explained using the language below, there is high support for the Biden Administration’s reversal of the Trump Administration rule and increased willingness to utilize safety net resources.

Words that Work: The Trump Administration’s “public charge” regulation was a policy targeting lawfully present immigrants that put immigration applications at risk if they used public programs for health care, food, or housing.

Hesitancy is about stigma, as well as fear. While research participants support immigration reform that will increase access to citizenship and resources, there is a high level of social stigma associated with government programs. In addition to the more general perception that hard working Americans should not need to rely on government support, the focus groups revealed that people in immigrant families see government aid as something that must be earned through paying taxes, and in some cases, going through the naturalization process.

MESSAGES

1. **Lead with human rights and government responsibility.** The poll and focus groups found that immigrant communities respond to messages that reflect an understanding of systemic struggles families face, the benefits and safety of using public assistance, and the positive impact of assistance on long-term family health and stability. *Focused*

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messaging around government resources being a basic and human right for families was the most effective theme, resonating with immigrants and their families regardless of partisanship. For instance, although the Republican-leaning group was unsupportive of the repeal of “public charge,” they sympathized with messages that focused on human-rights, families, and children.

Words that Work: Food, shelter, health care – these are basic human rights every family should be able to count on.

2. To mitigate stigma, our research suggests that communication:
 - a. **Emphasize families’ work and contributions.** Stressing to immigrants that they and other members of their communities are “paying their dues” by paying taxes, working hard in their jobs and contributing to society, can help soften this underlying perception. Reinforcing this theme by using language such as “hard working immigrant families” also helps.
 - b. **Position safety net programs as short-term help with long-run benefits.** Respondents all seemed to recognize that many Americans, regardless of immigration status, can find themselves in situations where they need to rely on safety-net programs. Emphasizing that in most cases this is just short-term help during tough times that can provide the stability to families needed to thrive in the long term can help overcome the stigma.

Words that Work: You work hard for your family. But every family needs help sometimes, and helping families get through tough times is what government programs were designed to do. Especially right now, millions of families are using government programs for help with food, health care, or rent, so they can keep contributing to our community and our economy over the long run.

3. **Reference the Trump and Biden administrations, but avoid politicization.** We referenced the current and former presidents to help research participants understand how and why this policy has changed: *President Biden ended the Trump administration’s policy that put immigration applications at risk if immigrants used public programs for health care, food, or housing.* Hearing that the Trump administration public charge regulations have been reversed made many research participants understand that the policy environment had in fact changed, and made many more likely to get the help and care they need. We must, however, be conscious of the potential for longer-term uncertainty that could be generated by framing the change in policy around administrative shifts, as immigrants may feel that the policy may change again if a GOP president is elected. We therefore suggest limited, strategic references to changes in presidential administration. This includes recognizing that references to the administrative shift are more effective in blue states, and among communities who are less knowledgeable about the public charge rule and immigration policy more broadly.

Democrats are more trusting of the federal government and the Biden Administration, as well as messages that specifically name the Trump Administration. However, it is important that references to particular policymakers not appear divisive or partisan. Even in “blue” areas, one reference to each president should suffice.

While many focus group participants did not share positive views of the Republican party, there was a sentiment that mentioning Republicans directly and negatively heightened political divisions. The Republican-leaning groups held a strong sentiment that the public charge rule should not have been reversed and that doing so contributes to dependence. Despite this belief, this group still recognized that *people should be able to get help if they “really” need it.*

Words that Work (blue states): President Biden ended the Trump Administration policy that put immigration applications at risk if lawfully-present immigrants used public programs for health care, food, or housing. Using these programs will have no effect on immigration status or applications.

Words that Work (red or purple states): The federal government has ended a policy that put immigration applications at risk if lawfully-present immigrants used public programs for health care, food, or housing. Using these programs will have no effect on immigration status or applications.

TRUSTED MESSENGERS

Finally, our research found that utilizing the right language with outreach is most effective when paired with trusted messengers in immigrant communities. These messengers include:

- Immigration lawyers/advocates
- Government agencies
- Members of the immigrant community who themselves have experience utilizing government resources without negative consequences.
- Adult U.S. Citizen of immigrant parents, particularly those who are politically progressive and less likely to stigmatize the use of safety net programs.

These messengers can help overcome the high levels of distrust in the media, government officials, and even social networks. Conversely, participants were less likely to report high trust in politicians and social influencers/celebrities.

The poll indicated that most respondents rely on television news sources (59%) and social media outlets, like Facebook (39%); however, focus group respondents were much more adamant about using official sources, such as U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and other legal/governmental websites. The focus groups provided valuable insight into the poll findings; across the board, focus group respondents described that many immigrants rely on

television and social media for the most up-to-date news on policies, but have very low trust in these sources until the information is verified through official government or legal websites.

Immigrant families look to immigration attorneys and government agencies as authorities on the public charge rule making it important for outreach efforts to engage local immigration lawyers and information from credible government entities.

Given that our research has found that federal government agencies are highly trusted sources of information on this subject, we suggest looking to government webpages for official language to make available to immigrants and their families. The following statement from the Department of Homeland Security is a good example of what could be useful for outreach efforts:

“This action ensures fair and humane treatment of legal immigrants and their U.S. citizen family members. Consistent with America’s bedrock values, we will not penalize individuals for choosing to access the health benefits and other supplemental government services available to them,” [said Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro N. Mayorkas](#).

DEMOGRAPHIC INSIGHTS

Immigrant families are not monolithic, messaging must be conscious of important differences between AAPI, Black, and Latino immigrants. While all groups noted discrimination, similarity with stigma in their communities, and comparable struggles, each group has nuances that should be accounted for in messaging and outreach.

- AAPI respondents—particularly Chinese, Vietnamese, and Filipino respondents—have lower levels of knowledge about the public charge rule and are more likely than other racial groups to believe that access to government resources must be “earned through the acquisition of citizenship.” Added emphasis on basic outreach about the public charge rule and stigma are therefore needed among all AAPI communities. Notably, Chinese poll respondents were particularly likely to know little or nothing about the public charge rule (77%). Further, they were more likely to find messages reaffirming the legality and safety of applying for public assistance highly convincing, relative to Vietnamese and Filipino respondents. Chinese respondents were also much less likely to prefer receiving information in English, indicating that in-language outreach could be particularly valuable for this subgroup.
- Conversely, Latino/as across the board have a much higher level of awareness of the policy environment due to a sense of being constantly targeted by immigration enforcement and punitive policy. Latinos are much more receptive to messaging and show the greatest likelihood of behavior shift following effective outreach that should be provided to Latino communities in both English and Spanish. The poll indicated that 51% of Latino/as prefer to receive information in Spanish, with only 48% preferring English.

- Black respondents also noted that African/Black immigrants tend to feel less welcomed by the US compared to Latinos and Asian Americans, generating a sense of alienation and potential to be resistant to messaging suggesting resources are available to them. Often, since immigration policies are focused on Latino/a and AAPI immigrants, outreach to African/Black immigrants should be tailored specifically for them through in-group messengers and in-language resources.

Regionally, messages should be tailored to immigrant communities that are prominent in targeted states. State policies regarding both government assistance and immigration enforcement vary; thus, outreach strategies should be mindful of these differences and write messages accordingly. In states with a more conservative ideology regarding immigration policy among state leaders (and the overall population) we must recognize that our communities are more likely to hear and believe narratives regarding government resources being “handouts”.

Outreach efforts in conservative states will therefore need to focus more attention addressing this stigma to be successful. Although we heard these sentiments more directly among Texans, the same underlying ideology is present in other conservative states.

WORDS THAT WORK – CONSOLIDATED

Communicating about the Trump Administration public charge rule’s replacement with a new, less restrictive policy is essential. Many in immigrant families expressed fears of using public programs due to immigration concerns. Advocates can maximize the impact of their outreach efforts by employing these research-informed talking points:

- Food, shelter, health care – these are basic human rights every family should be able to count on.
- You work hard for your family. But every family needs help sometimes, and helping families get through tough times is what government programs were designed to do. Especially right now, millions of families are using government programs for help with food, health care, or rent, so they can keep contributing to our community and our economy over the long run.
- The Trump administration “public charge” regulation was a policy targeting lawfully-present immigrants that put immigration applications at risk if they used public programs for health care, food, or housing.
- [Blue states] President Biden ended the Trump Administration policy that put immigration applications at risk if lawfully-present immigrants used public programs for health care, food, or housing. Using these programs will have no effect on immigration status or applications.

Or

- [Red or purple states] The federal government has ended a policy that put immigration applications at risk if lawfully-present immigrants used public programs for health care, food, or housing. Using these programs will have no effect on immigration status or applications.