

# UNITED SPINAL<sup>NOW</sup>

## Proof That Lives Depend on Your Vote

BY JAMES WEISMAN  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER



**J**ustin Dart, sometimes referred to as the father of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), used to say, “Vote like your life depends on it. It does.”

I knew Justin, and always admired his advocacy, but I thought, “Vote like your life depends on it,” was a bit over the top. I repeated it to motivate people with disabilities (PWDs) to register to vote, but actually thought it meant, “Vote like the quality of your life depends on it.” Justin was right. I was wrong.

The Trump Administration released final regulations that expand the circumstances under which the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) can exclude applicants for entry to our country or deny “green card” resident status.

The rule would permit DHS to bar entry to an individual likely to become a “public charge.” Intended to promote the entry of “self-sufficient” immigrants, the rule cruelly ignores the fact that most immigrants seeking to leave their country and enter ours are poor.

Some may have disabilities or could develop disabilities after they arrive, get hurt in an accident after arrival, have a disabled child or need help with healthcare, food or housing at some time. DHS even admitted in response to comments on the proposed rule that Congress did not intend to exempt PWDs, nor was it DHS’s intention to discriminate against PWDs – just to ensure self-sufficiency.

To make it more difficult for immigrants to receive green cards or to be granted entry, the regulation expands the category of benefits, receipt of which could render an individual “a public charge.” Cash benefits like SSI, non-emergency Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and Section 8 vouchers for rental assistance will be held against green card applicants.

Medicaid benefits for children under 21 and pregnant women will not be counted nor will services funded by Medicaid but delivered in school settings. Receipt of Medicaid will not be held against asylum seekers and other at-risk populations.

The rule states that if an individual receives more than 12 months of public benefits during a 36-month period, they can be considered a “public charge.” However, benefits are considered in the aggregate – meaning, if you receive SSI and Medicaid in one month, it will count as receiving two months’ worth of benefits. Incidentally, the rule is not retroactive, so current green card holders will not be subject to the new standard.

Here are some examples of what the administration will consider negative evidence - having a household income less than 125 percent of the federal poverty level; having a medical condition that interferes with work or school; lacking money to cover reasonably foreseeable medical costs; having financial liabilities; having a low credit score; lacking a college degree; lacking English skills sufficient to enter the job market; or having a sponsor unlikely to be able to provide financial support.

According to DHS, this is evidence of self-sufficiency - having private unsubsidized health insurance; having income at least 250 percent of the poverty level.

Ken Cuccinelli, acting director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, seriously said that Emma Lazarus’ famous poem that has been displayed on the Statue of Liberty since 1903 should be changed to, “Give me your tired, and your poor who can stand on their own two feet, and who will not become a public charge.” Obviously, “stand on your own two feet” was just a metaphor. But in fact, “stand on your own two feet,” taken literally, might just be a requirement for admission to a country that until recently, welcomed the “wretched refuse” of “teeming shores.”

Your life or the life of someone you love may in fact depend on who you vote for. Register, educate yourself about your choices, and by all means, vote.