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Gov. Christie Whitman Announced a State Funded Program to Provide Food Stamps for Legal Immigrants

Gov. Christie Whitman today announced a state funded program to provide food stamps for legal immigrants who are children, elderly or disabled and would have lost the benefit September 1 under a change in last year's federal welfare law. The Governor today signed Executive Order Number 74 which will allow these New Jersey residents to continue to receive food stamps while they work toward becoming United States citizens.

Children, elderly and disabled legal immigrants who are not yet eligible for citizenship will receive food stamps until they reach the required five years of residency in this country needed to become a citizen. They will be required to apply for citizenship within 60 days of reaching eligibility for residency. These legal immigrants will receive food stamps until their application for citizenship is processed.

The federal law change, part of the welfare legislation signed last year in August, would have made legal immigrants living in some 16,000 New Jersey households ineligible for the federal food stamp program. The Governor's extension will restore benefits to an estimated 10,000 households. Legal immigrants who are between the ages of 18 and 64 and are able-bodied will lose their benefits on September 1.

"The extension of benefits for legal immigrants who are children, disabled or elderly will ensure the health and welfare of these New Jerseyans with special needs while they work toward becoming U.S. citizens," said Gov. Whitman. "This provision is part of our Work First New Jersey welfare reform program that seeks to transition recipients into employment, while providing them with the support necessary to keep them working."

"As we weighed this decision, we had to balance our deep concern for New Jersey's many legal immigrants who are elderly or disabled with the state's ability to pick up a cost that the federal government had been paying for," said Human Services Commissioner William Waldman.

State officials estimate the cost of this effort will be approximately \$15 million. These funds are already included in the Work First New Jersey program budget and will be available upon the approval of the Legislative Joint Budget Oversight Committee.

In the executive order, which takes effect immediately, the Governor directed the Commissioner of Human Services to take all necessary action to implement the extension of benefits to the specified legal immigrants. The Department of Human Services is currently developing the implementation plan, which includes the notification of clients covered by the extension, as well as welfare agencies throughout the state.

Under the federal welfare legislation passed last August, certain legal immigrants who entered this country before August 22, 1996 also became ineligible for the federal Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Medicaid programs. Gov. Whitman took advantage of a provision in that legislation that allowed states to restore benefits to legal immigrants. She restored the Medicaid program for legal immigrants who entered the country before August 22, 1996.

To ease the impact of this federal reduction, Gov. Whitman developed a transition program to allow immigrants qualifying for citizenship to receive assistance from the state's General Assistance welfare program while their citizenship application was being processed. Those who had not yet met the five-year residency requirement for citizenship continued to be eligible for General Assistance while they applied for citizenship.

This transition program became unnecessary for SSI recipients, however, when funds were restored within the recently adopted federal budget.

To address some of the federal law changes affecting immigrants, the state has also initiated a citizenship campaign to provide technical assistance to help legal immigrants living in New Jersey become citizens. Under this provision, about 3,500 people have received a range of services including, English language training, civics/history classes and assistance in filing citizenship applications.