



## Message Testing to Combat Public Charge's Chilling Effect in California

MARCH 2020



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## About Vision

Vision Strategy and Insights is a full-service research and strategy firm with more than 20 years of experience in the development and implementation of actionable research studies among general market, Hispanic, Black, and Asian consumers.

Learn more at [visionstrategyandinsights.com](https://visionstrategyandinsights.com).

## About the Foundation

The California Health Care Foundation is dedicated to advancing meaningful, measurable improvements in the way the health care delivery system provides care to the people of California, particularly those with low incomes and those whose needs are not well served by the status quo. We work to ensure that people have access to the care they need, when they need it, at a price they can afford.

CHCF informs policymakers and industry leaders, invests in ideas and innovations, and connects with changemakers to create a more responsive, patient-centered health care system.

For more information, visit [www.chcf.org](https://www.chcf.org).

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## Project Background

Historically, the public charge rule allowed immigration officials to deny an application for permanent residence (“green card”) or certain other visas if the applicant was determined likely to depend on the government as their primary source of support. In the past, use of cash welfare and government-funded long-term care were the only public benefit programs that counted against applicants.

In 2018 the Trump administration proposed changes that redefined public charge, including expanding the list of public benefits that count against applicants to include nonemergency Medicaid (“Medi-Cal” in California) for those 21 and over (unless pregnant), federal housing assistance, and SNAP (“CalFresh” in California).

The changes to the public charge rule, along with other federal immigration policy and rhetoric, has created fear and confusion. Many low-income California immigrants and their families, **including those who aren’t subject to public charge**, are avoiding use of public benefit programs.

This confusion extends to low-income undocumented young adults who are newly eligible for state-funded full-scope Medi-Cal starting in 2020.

## Project Objectives

This study focused on **California immigrants who are not subject to public charge** but who are at high risk of avoiding public benefits. It examined respondents’ knowledge of the public charge rule and its impact on their willingness to enroll or stay enrolled in public benefit programs.

Key objectives of the study included:

- Quickly identify legally accurate messages and trusted messengers effective at encouraging **low-income California immigrants not subject to public charge** to keep using the public benefits they are eligible for, CalFresh and Medi-Cal.

- Better understand what messages work across diverse immigrant groups and important differences between groups when it comes to effective messaging.
- Based on testing, provide messaging recommendations to organizations and individuals who are communicating with immigrant populations about enrollment in public benefits and about public charge.

One focus group was designed to identify effective messages and messengers to specifically encourage low-income, young adult immigrants to enroll in Medi-Cal.

## Study Limitations

### Shifting Policy on Public Charge

This study took place in December 2019, when the new public charge rule **was not in effect**, due to a nationwide preliminary injunction. On January 27, 2020, the Supreme Court struck down the nationwide preliminary injunction. As of February 24, 2020, the new public charge rule went into effect in all states.

Although research was conducted in a different policy environment, it still offers useful insights. We highlight recommendations that still apply, even though the new rule is now in effect. We also identify unknowns around messaging that may need to be addressed with future testing, given the change in the policy environment.

### Scope and Applicability

Focus groups took place in a single location in California.

Focus was on messaging to immigrants who, based on their immigration status, are **not** subject to the public charge test, rather than those subject to the test. Recommendations for communicating with individuals subject to public charge is beyond the scope of this project.

## Methodology

Six focus groups were conducted in Los Angeles in December 2019. Six to eight respondents participated in each two-hour group.

Five were focused on public charge, and one (group 6) on Medi-Cal expansion in the context of public charge.

Recruiting criteria included self-reported household incomes that would qualify them for CalFresh and Medi-Cal. Groups 1 to 5 reported immigration statuses not subject to public charge.

With each group, the moderator explored questions about the immigrant experience generally, familiarity with public charge and public programs, and reactions to existing sample print materials in use and to KeepYourBenefits.org, an online interactive tool.

Groups were conducted by bilingual, bicultural moderators reflecting each group.

**Table 1. Focus Groups, by Segment and Language**

GROUP	SEGMENT	LANGUAGE
1	Latinx / Spanish-preferred / recent immigrants	Spanish
2	Latinx / Spanish-preferred / long-term* US residents	Spanish
3	Latinx / English-preferred / long-term* US residents	English
4	Asian American	Chinese
5	Asian American	Vietnamese
6	Young adults 19–25 / undocumented/DACA/ other status / English-preferred	English

\*Long-term is defined as 10 or more years in the United States.

## Key Findings and Recommendations: Public Charge

### Usage of Public Benefits

Respondents described uncertainty and fear about enrolling in benefits, even when they knew they qualified.

*“As a matter of fact, my son when he goes to school, some people apply for subsidies from the government, but we dare not do that. Because we are afraid that if we get benefits, when we go to get our status legalized there will be some problems for that.”*

— Chinese respondent

*“Last week, my wife had an appointment with a social worker for Medi-Cal and food stamps, but they started asking for income tax and she decided not to. First of all, we’re in the process of her becoming a resident, so I don’t want any trouble. I decided not to take any government aid. I don’t know for sure, but I decided not to do anything. . . .”*

— Latinx respondent

*“I think somebody said that if we receive too many benefits later on if we want to be a US citizen, it will be harder to become a citizen.”*

— Vietnamese respondent

Respondents were also concerned that sponsors or their children would be charged the value of the public benefits that they utilized.

Food stamps (which was *not* included in the public charge test at the time of the research) was viewed as similar to “cash benefits” and therefore respondents believed it “counted against you” in a public charge determination.

## Sources of Information

Sources of information about “public charge” among Latinx respondents were primarily lawyers and social workers. Among Chinese respondents, the primary sources of information on this issue had been insurance agents, and among Vietnamese respondents, the primary information source was Vietnamese TV.

Other sources of information included the Mexican Consulate, US Immigration Services website, online research, organizations who serve immigrants like Medi-Cal, Twitter (Chinese), WeChat (Chinese), government offices, and word of mouth.

Media sources of information include Al Rojo Vivo, Channels 34 (Univision) and 52 (Telemundo), local radio (Vietnamese), *World Journal* (Chinese), *Total Headline News* (Chinese), *World News* (Chinese), newspapers (Vietnamese), and YouTube (Vietnamese)

Respondents identified sources of incorrect information on public charge as Al Rojo Vivo, social media like Facebook and WeChat, newspapers (Vietnamese), and word of mouth.

## Messaging: Key Findings

In general, findings were consistent across groups, except when noted below.

**Participants viewed government agencies as the most credible source of information on the subject of public charge** (can depend on municipality; may not be the case outside of California).

- ▶ Immigrant advocacy organizations were also credible, but not as much as government.
- ▶ Participants considered .gov websites more credible than .org websites.

**There is high awareness of the issue of public charge** — most expressed that applying for and/or using public benefits might put your immigration status at risk.

- ▶ However, not all participants were familiar with the term “public charge.”
- ▶ There is also confusion over whether “public charge” applies to them, and for some, whether it applies to their families.
- ▶ Confusion is further fueled by some imprecise translations of public charge–related terms into Vietnamese and Chinese.

**Misinformation and cautious advice from friends, family, and community, as well as trusted sources, such as lawyers and social workers, foster confusion.**

- ▶ Many are reticent to do anything to put their future immigration status (and those of their family) in jeopardy.
- ▶ Even when questions are answered, there is still reticence to take a risk, which is fueled by concern that the rules could change at any time.
- ▶ Misinformation/cautious advice is less of a concern to Vietnamese participants.

**Respondents were just as much interested in understanding that they are not subject to public charge as in knowing who is subject.** This serves as a double validation tool.

Most were not aware that benefits available to the children of immigrants would not impact the parents' immigration status.

Respondents reported getting very little information about public charge where and when they need it most, such as Medi-Cal and other social service offices, legal offices, etc.

- Many are also combatting a lack of information among family, friends, and community members.

## Top Messaging Recommendations

1. Include the publication "sponsor," ideally a government agency.
2. Provide a consistent definition of public charge, including:
  - A clear list or grouping of those who are not affected by public charge as well as a clear list or grouping of those who are affected by public charge.
  - Specify that "conditional" green card holders, like other green card holders, are not subject to public charge.
3. Be explicit that benefits available to the children of immigrants do not impact the parents' immigration status.
4. Feature a website and telephone number(s) to obtain more information and to further verify the source, and thus credibility, of the information.
5. Date materials so that readers can assess the timeliness of the publication; note any updates with a date as well.

## Other Recommendations

### Design Elements

Factual information was a higher priority for respondents than layout or design. However, visuals help draw the eye and provide relief from lots of copy. These tested particularly well:

- Stoplight motif and clearly demarcated boxes (below) were useful in showing which populations are subject to public charge and which aren't. (Some respondents wanted to see green, yellow, and red lights if stoplights used.)

#### Does "Public Charge" in the Immigration Process Apply to Me?

##### NOT If You Are:

- A Citizen
- A Legal Permanent Resident
- A Refugee
- An Asylee
- A T-Visa Applicant
- Applying for or holding a U-Visa
- A self petitioner under VAWA
- Applying or re-registering for TPS
- An Afghan and Iraqi Special Immigrant
- A Special Immigrant Juvenile
- An Individual Granted Relief Under CCA, NACARA, or HRIFA



**Are you and your family members U.S. citizens?**  
Public charge does NOT apply to you. You should continue to enroll in programs you are eligible for.



- Visuals of people using benefits (below). Be sure to include benefit programs for individuals as well as families. (Participants also noted they preferred photographs over illustrations.)



## Distribution

Provide trusted and reliable public charge information in key community locations and through channels that immigrants and their families rely on. Participants said this is where they would want to see materials on public charge:

- Churches
- Hospitals, clinics
- County social services and other public services offices
- Public libraries
- Children's schools
- Lawyers' offices
- Social media
- TV commercials
- Morning shows (Spanish TV)

## What We Don't Know

Because the study was conducted before the new rule went into effect, more testing may be needed to understand whether certain findings hold. For example:

- One key finding of the study was that participants liked seeing clear lists of the public benefits considered under public charge (at the time of the study, only long-term care and cash welfare), and those that are not.
- Similar to the "Who is subject to public charge?" question, the "double validation" of seeing a certain benefit, like Medi-Cal, on the "safe" list and **NOT** on the "risky" list was reassuring.

NOW . . .

- Would it still be effective to list the benefits considered under public charge, as it will now include nonemergency Medi-Cal for nonpregnant adults and CalFresh?
- While the study's target population remains not subject to public charge, would simply seeing that those benefits are considered under public charge stoke fear and serve as a deterrent?



# Key Findings and Recommendations: Medi-Cal Expansion

## Public Charge

None of the respondents knew the term “public charge,” but they had heard that using public benefits could impact future changes in immigration status, cost them money in the future, or lead to deportation.

None of the respondents were aware that undocumented young adults would be eligible for full-scope Medi-Cal in January 2020.

- ▶ Many had been enrolled in Medi-Cal as children but had aged out. Most had not pursued other options out of risk aversion.

### RECOMMENDATION

#### Communications materials should be clear on the following:

- ▶ All low-income Californians 19–25 qualify “regardless of immigration status.”
- ▶ The requirements to sign up (e.g., “all you need is your ID and a check stub”).
- ▶ Which benefits and services are covered under Medi-Cal.
- ▶ The information shared on applications won’t be shared with immigration.
- ▶ Services through Medi-Cal are provided at little to no cost.
- ▶ Specify that it’s a State of California program.
- ▶ Add a phone number and/or website to indicate available assistance.

## Distribution

Respondents identified “.org” and “.gov” websites as more likely to be reliable sources, compared to other sources that come up when searching the web.

These younger adults are more reliant on electronic mediums to fulfill their information needs.

### RECOMMENDATION

#### Leverage online media utilized more frequently by these young people to distribute Medi-Cal expansion information:

- ▶ Social media (Facebook, Instagram)
- ▶ Videos from experts — people like them who have already applied / been accepted

## Design Elements

Some of the communications materials shown in the groups received a positive reaction to the graphic elements, while others received a more negative reaction.

- ▶ An arm in a cast making a fist was perceived to be empowering.
- ▶ Comic book style graphics were seen as cartoon-like and for a much younger audience.

### RECOMMENDATION

#### Use graphics that respondents can relate to, such as:

- ▶ Elements that represent the life, struggles, and opportunities experienced by immigrants .
- ▶ Photographs that directly relate to obtaining medical services, as illustrations run the danger of being perceived to be cartoonish. Appropriate examples include Medical providers, Latinx and people of other ethnicities receiving medical care, and people going online.
- ▶ Balance of graphics and copy. Use of bullet points helps to cut copy to most salient points.



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## Questions?

Findings also available at:

[www.chcf.org/public-charge-msg](http://www.chcf.org/public-charge-msg)

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## Resources

Interactive tools to help immigrants and those who assist them understand recent changes in public charge rules:

- ▶ Online at [KeepYourBenefitsCA.org](http://KeepYourBenefitsCA.org) or [tusbeneficiospublicos.org](http://tusbeneficiospublicos.org). The online tools are available in English, Spanish, and Chinese at either site.
- ▶ By texting “benefits” (for English), “libre” (for Spanish), “福利” (for Chinese), or “lợi ích” (for Vietnamese) to 650-376-8006.