

State Agency Puts Hold On Collection Practice

Social Services Was Billing Sponsors Of Immigrants

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The state Department of Social Services has stopped collection actions against sponsors of legal immigrants who have received public assistance.

The state agency had been billing sponsors of legal immigrants under a provision in the 1996 federal Welfare Reform Act that makes sponsors liable for the costs of public assistance immigrants receive.

Earlier this month, Attorney General Richard Blumenthal asked DSS to stop its collection from sponsors until his office reviews its procedures and policies. Blumenthal's office has halted 10 pending lawsuits against sponsors who have failed to reach a payment plan with DSS.

"Because of the questions raised about the complicated legal processes, our commissioner and the attorney general have agreed that collection efforts should be temporarily suspended pending a joint review to make sure all legal standards are being met," said David Dearborn, a spokesman for DSS.

Legal entry into the United States has long been contingent upon a sponsor, usually a family member who promises to support the immigrant financially.

But after the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, sponsors must agree to reimburse any government agency if the immigrant receives benefits for low-income residents.

According to DSS, from Jan. 1, 2004, through Dec. 31, 2006, the state paid \$31.2 million in medical benefits to 2,457 sponsored legal immigrants. The figure does not include cash and food stamps benefits.

Immigration advocates have decried the practice of billing sponsors, saying it is financially devastating to sponsors and that it prevents legal immigrants from receiving the critical health care they qualify for.