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New U.S. law on Medicaid requires proof of citizenship

Ohio must verify status of its 1.7 million recipients

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U.S. citizens will now be asked to provide proof of citizenship before they can get Medicaid - the government's free health care for the poor.

In Ohio, the new federal law kicks in Monday. Officials say it will affect most of the state's 1.7 million Medicaid recipients.

Those who receive Medicare or Supplemental Security Income along with Medicaid are exempt because their citizenship has been verified.

Legal-aid lawyers and other advocates are publicizing the change - part of the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 - to keep the poor from losing benefits.

They want Medicaid recipients to know that if they cannot afford copies of birth certificates or other documents establishing citizenship, county welfare offices must pay for them. And if the documents are not available - because they were lost in Hurricane Katrina, for example - Medicaid recipients can sign a statement that says they tried to obtain the paperwork but were unable to.

"That should not be the reason that anybody should not get or lose Medicaid," said Bob Bonthius, senior staff attorney for the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, which has offered to help anyone having problems with the new rules.

New applicants will be asked for the paperwork establishing citizenship at their initial meeting with caseworkers. Those already receiving Medicaid will be asked for it at their next redetermination meeting. State rules in Ohio say recipients have 30 days to comply.

Until now, citizens applying for Medicaid only had to sign a statement saying they were citizens. The list of acceptable documents establishing citizenship includes passports and certified copies of birth certificates.

Increased demand for those could complicate the process further, if offices become overwhelmed with requests for copies.

"We expect this to be a huge mess for our clients because they are very likely not to have these documents closely at hand," said Gene King, managing attorney at Ohio State Legal Services Association, "and it will be time-consuming, burdensome and expensive to obtain them."

Certified birth certificates cost about \$17 in Ohio, he said.

"If you have mom and a couple of kids, you could easily be looking at 50 bucks. And if mom can't afford that - and let's face it, if she's on Medicaid, she can't - then the counties will be strained by this."

Cuyahoga County residents needing legal help with the new rule can call the Legal Aid Society of

Cleveland, 216-687-1900.

Residents of other counties can call 1-866-529-6446 to be forwarded to the legal aid society nearest them.

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