

The Star-Ledger

N.J.'s AG thinks Trump's asylum plan could hurt economy. Federal office seems to agree.

By Blake Nelson

NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published Nov. 8, 2019

A few months after seeking asylum in the United States, you're allowed to apply for a work permit.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services then has 30 days to approve or deny your application.

The Trump administration, however, has proposed eliminating that 30-day deadline. New Jersey and a host of other states think that's a bad idea, and many of their concerns are echoed by federal data.

New Jersey Attorney General Gurbir Grewal formally protested the proposal Friday, in a letter co-signed by more than a dozen other state attorneys general.

Eliminating the deadline could lead to "indefinite" wait times, which would marginalize thousands "who could otherwise be working, paying taxes, and further contributing to their communities," Grewal said in a statement. He argued in the letter that the proposal would both hurt vulnerable people and harm the economy.

The attorneys also argued that the change would be illegal.

Research published by the U.S. Office of the Federal Register agreed that the change would likely lead to lost wages and taxes. Asylum seekers could lose more than \$770 million in compensation every year if the rule takes effect, which in turn could cause them to be more reliant on the government for support.

Furthermore, the government could lose more than \$118 million in taxes, the office said.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services argued in a statement last month that the 30-day deadline was outdated, and that allowing more time to review work applications would "strengthen national security."

"Our first priority as an agency is to safeguard the integrity of our nation's legal immigration system from those who seek to exploit or abuse it," Ken Cuccinelli, the agency's acting director, said in a statement.

The agency also said it could save time and money by not having to process applications as quickly, but did not offer specifics.

The U.S.'s immigration system is struggling to keep up with asylum seekers nationwide, and there has been a backlog in New Jersey.

More than 2,200 people were granted asylum in the state from fiscal year 2015 through 2017, the most recent year available, according to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. That represents only a fraction of the number that applied.

Attorneys general from 18 states and the District of Columbia signed the letter. All are Democrats, and represent most Democratic state attorneys general nationwide. Friday was the deadline for public comment on the proposal.

The letter was also directed at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, which did not immediately respond to a request for comment.