



Highlights of [GAO-09-375](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support, Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal law restricts noncitizens' access to public benefits, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Further, when noncitizens who legally reside in this country through sponsorship of a family member apply for these benefits, they are subject to sponsor deeming, which requires benefit agencies to combine noncitizens' incomes with those of their sponsors to determine eligibility. Sponsors are also financially liable for benefits paid to the noncitizen, and benefit agencies must seek repayment for these costs. GAO was asked to analyze (1) what is known about the size of the noncitizen population potentially affected by the sponsor deeming requirements for TANF, Medicaid, SNAP, and SSI; (2) to what extent have agencies implemented sponsor deeming; (3) to what extent have agencies implemented sponsor repayment. To address these, GAO analyzed federal data, surveyed states, and interviewed federal, state, and local officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) provide additional guidance on sponsor deeming and the Secretary of Homeland Security improve access to information on who is sponsored. Both agencies generally agreed with the recommendations, although HHS disagreed that additional guidance specifically for TANF was needed.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, [click on GAO-09-375](#). For more information, contact Kay Brown at (202) 512-7215 or brownke@gao.gov.

SPONSORED NONCITIZENS AND PUBLIC BENEFITS

More Clarity in Federal Guidance and Better Access to Federal Information Could Improve Implementation of Income Eligibility Rules

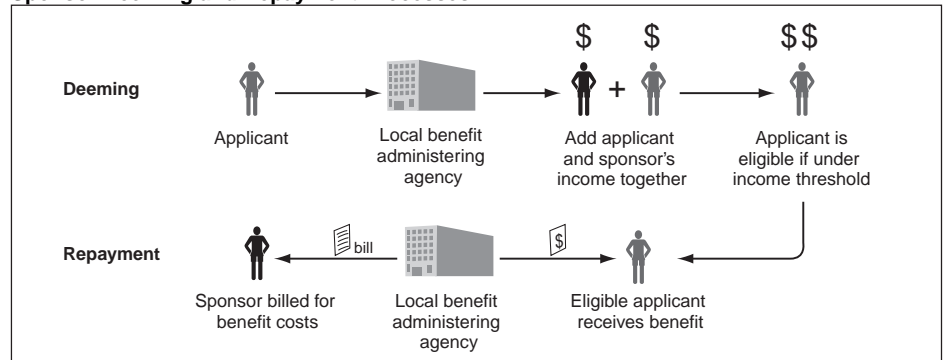
What GAO Found

The number of sponsored noncitizens potentially affected by sponsor deeming is unknown; however, federal restrictions on their eligibility for TANF, Medicaid, SNAP, and SSI, as well as other factors, likely limit the number affected. The most recent data available suggest that 11 percent (473,000) of sponsored noncitizens applied for TANF, Medicaid, or SNAP during the course of 2007, and less than 1 percent (29,000) applied for SSI. In addition to federal restrictions, benefit agency officials reported that applicants' reluctance or inability to obtain sponsor income information further reduces instances of deeming.

Nationwide, most benefit administering agencies have established sponsor deeming policies for TANF, SNAP, and SSI. However, agencies in 20 states have not done so for Medicaid, due in part to the lack of federal guidance for Medicaid on this requirement. Yet, even among administering agencies that have established policies, many expressed the desire for more federal guidance on various aspects of deeming. For example, over 60 percent of state officials reported that additional clarification on applying an exception to deeming when noncitizen applicants are indigent would be useful. Local officials also reported difficulties accessing information from the Department of Homeland Security needed to determine whether an applicant is sponsored—an essential part of the deeming process.

Few agencies have taken steps to implement sponsor repayment of TANF, Medicaid, SNAP, and SSI, due in part to inconsistent federal guidance. While law requires that agencies administratively pursue repayment, federal regulations and guidance suggest it is optional. In total, only two states have pursued sponsor repayment. Benefit agency officials reported that several factors discourage pursuit of repayment. Specifically, they reported that the process involves high relative costs since noncitizens who receive benefits after deeming only qualify because both they and their sponsors have very low incomes. Officials also reported that local staff who pursue repayment for these benefits sometimes have competing priorities.

Sponsor Deeming and Repayment Processes



Source: GAO.