

Best Practices

for Healthcare Providers Working with Immigrant Patients

The Role of Healthcare Providers in the Immigration Journey

Healthcare providers treating immigrant patients are sometimes asked to do more than just support their patient's health. Some examples of additional services immigrant patients might request from their healthcare provider are:



Civil Surgeon Exams —

Required medical exams for green card applications, performed by a USCIS-designated provider.



Letters of Support —

When a forensic exam is not needed, letters of support demonstrate that an individual is receiving services necessary for their health.



Forensic Evaluations —

Supplemental evidence for an immigration benefits application, performed by a provider with relevant expertise.



Medical Records —

Records of services or treatments are often used as evidence for eligibility for certain immigration benefits.

COMMUNITY RESOURCES: Identifying a Need for a Legal Referral

Immigrants may seek out healthcare before legal assistance related to their immigration status. Especially in the context of humanitarian relief for survivors of violence, fear and confusion are common barriers for immigrants seeking assistance. For that reason, it is helpful when providers can issue-spot potential eligibility and offer appropriate referrals.¹

¹ Several community referral options include:

Houston Immigrant Rights Hotline: Call 1-833-HOU-IMMI to get up-to-date information about changing immigration policies, to report discrimination and racial profiling, and a source for referrals to legal services providers and immigrant rights organizers.

AccessHOU.org: A database of resources for agencies working with immigrants in Greater Houston.

Tahirih Justice Center: Tahirih provides free and confidential legal and social services to immigrants who are or have experienced violence or been denied basic human rights because of their gender.

Best Practices for Healthcare Providers Working with Immigrant Patients

Key Barriers to Access



Cultural humility

Cultural humility in a healthcare setting is an approach where providers continuously **reflect on their own biases, recognize the limits of their knowledge** about a patient's background, and **actively seek to understand each patient's cultural perspective**. Practicing cultural humility supports in-clinic advocacy, improves patient comfort and access to care, and helps providers deliver safe, effective treatment to patients from all backgrounds.

Culturally informed care includes modifications in health information, care management, provider-patient communication, and workforce training.²



Restrictions in public benefits eligibility

Despite changes to eligibility in the 2025 "One Big Beautiful Bill Act," all immigrants residing in and intending to remain in Texas are eligible for **Emergency Medicaid**.

All pregnant people are eligible for prenatal care through the **CHIP Perinatal Program** regardless of their immigration status.



Immigration enforcement

Many immigrant communities fear accessing healthcare due to misinformation about the lapsed **"Public Charge"** rule and the more recently rescinded **"Sensitive Locations Policy"**, which previously barred "enforcement actions" at locations like schools, healthcare facilities, and places of worship.

BEST PRACTICE

Providers should advise individuals to always seek medical treatment in an emergency. ER departments cannot turn individuals away due to immigration status or inability to pay.

Always remind patients that they have the right to **free medical interpretation**. This toolkit provides additional resources for application assistance.

Be sure to **share accurate information** about USCIS policies so that qualifying patients can seek benefits.

Providers should **refuse consent to warrantless ICE and CBP searches** of private areas in healthcare facilities. Staff should be **trained on what to do** if immigration agents enter a facility.

BEST PRACTICE

² Center for Healthcare Strategies, Inc., "Health Literacy and the Role of Culture," available at: https://www.chcs.org/media/Health_Literacy_Role_of_Culture.pdf

Cultural Humility in Healthcare

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Culturally informed care includes modifications in the following aspects of healthcare:¹

Health Information	Care Management
• Reduce the use of healthcare industry jargon. • Translate healthcare materials into multiple languages. • Provide interpreter services and remind patients of their ability to access them (this includes bilingual staff, in-person interpreters, and phone interpreters). • Connecting with trusted community centers such as churches or schools to share disease prevention and health promotion messages.	• Establish care teams that are inclusive of diverse backgrounds and skill sets in order to more effectively meet the social and medical needs of a wider range of patients. • Provide culturally relevant healthcare information and medical self-management tools (activities an individual takes on to facilitate their own self-care and decision-making). • Connect patients with community-based services and supports beyond your clinic.
Provider-Patient Communication	Workforce Training
• Provide guidance on nutrition and lifestyle that aligns with individual patients' cultural and religious values. • Respect cultural norms around body language, clothing, and gender during appointment interactions. • Ask questions sensitively for clarification or to dismiss preconceived notions.	• Increase racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity among providers. • Train providers and front-line staff in empathy interviews, culturally informed communication, and trust-building.

¹ Center for Healthcare Strategies, Inc., "Health Literacy and the Role of Culture," available at: https://www.chcs.org/media/Health_Literacy_Role_of_Culture.pdf

Navigating America's Healthcare System

For Immigrant Patients in the Greater Houston Area

Why Preventative Care Matters

Routine and consistent healthcare — including pediatric, dental, and mental health services — are critical. Preventative and primary care helps **detect and prevent** serious medical issues before they can become major. Thus, they are essential to your health, wellbeing, and ability to engage in your community, job, educational, and familial obligations.

Seeking out preventive care in a timely manner will help you ensure that you receive more **proactive, effective, and cost-efficient** care. Below are some important general services:



Annual check-up —
Primary Care Provider (PCP) checks all areas of your health.



Vaccinations —
Vaccinations like measles, mumps, rubella, polio, etc. are usually covered at 100% by insurance.



Flu shot —
Helps protect you from certain strains of the flu virus.



Preventative dentistry —
Regular oral exam usually every 6 months as well as teeth cleanings and X-rays.



Colonoscopy —
Screening for colon cancer.



Mammogram —
Routine X-rays of breast tissue to check for any signs of cancer or other abnormalities

Public Charge Overview

Immigration law prevents people who have used certain public benefits from pursuing certain types of immigration applications. As of the date of publication of this toolkit, the 2022 Public Charge Final Rule is in effect.

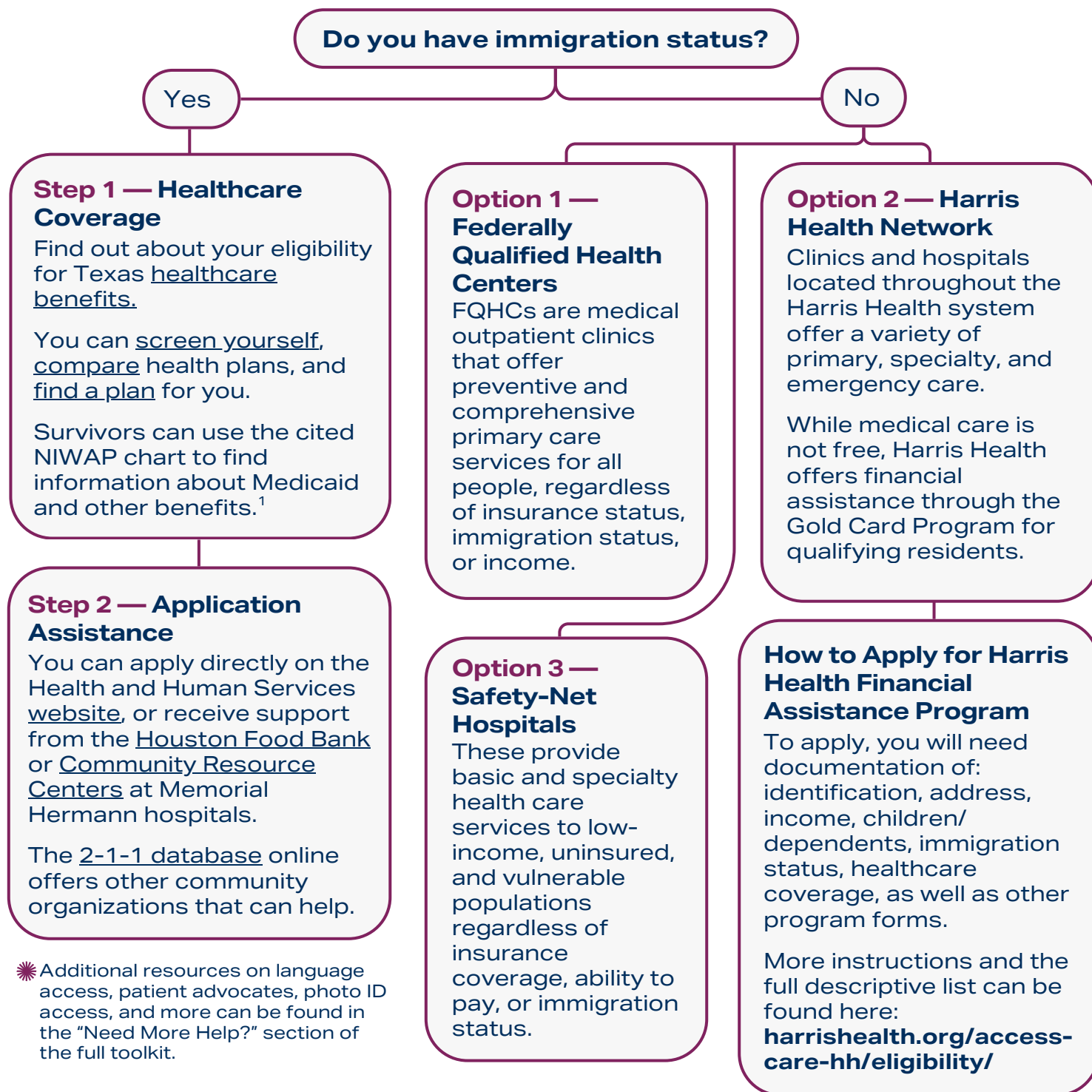
USCIS **does not** consider an applicant's receipt of Medicaid/CHIP (with rare exceptions), public housing, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits as part of public charge.

More information on public charge can be found on the [USCIS website](https://uscis.dhs.gov/public-charge).

Navigating America's Healthcare System



How to Find Affordable Care



¹ National Immigrant Women's Advocacy Project, "Access to State-Funded Public Benefits in Texas for Survivors, Based on Immigration Status," available at: <https://niwaplibrary.wcl.american.edu/wp-content/uploads/TX-Public-Benefits-Chart-9.4.22.pdf>

Immigration Enforcement

What to Know for Service Providers

Sensitive Locations Policy

Previously, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) were directed to refrain from enforcement actions at schools, healthcare facilities, and places of worship, among other sites and locations, in accordance with the “Sensitive Locations Policy.”¹ As of January 31, 2025, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) allows ICE enforcement actions — including arrests, interviews, searches, and surveillance — at formerly protected locations, without obtaining authorization.

How You Can Protect Patients

New DHS regulations **do not supersede** legal protections under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPPA) that governs the disclosure of protected health information, or search and seizure protections under the 4th Amendment. **ICE enforcement officials need either staff consent or a judicial warrant to enter areas that are considered private, which may include patient rooms, offices, and inpatient units.**

If immigration authorities or other officials present warrants or court orders upon entering a healthcare facility, trained and pre-designated employees should review the search warrants to ensure **four key things:**

- It must be a valid judicial warrant
- It must state the address of the specific premises to be searched
- This action is being executed during the time period specified on the warrant, if any
- It must be signed by a judge or magistrate judge

Should officials go beyond the scope of their authority to search for or seize objects or people as stated in the warrant, the staff member can object to the search. Should officials attempt to conduct a warrantless search, providers should refuse consent. If officers indicate their intent to return with a warrant, the healthcare facility should contact a lawyer to be present at that time.

¹ National Immigration Law Center. “Factsheet : Trump’s Recission of Protected Areas Policies Undermines Safety for All,” available at: Center for Healthcare Strategies, Inc., “Health Literacy and the Role of Culture,” available at: https://www.chcs.org/media/Health_Literacy_Role_of_Culture.pdf

Immigration Enforcement

What to Know for Service Providers



Action Items for Providers



Provide educational materials to patients on immigration enforcement actions and their rights during related occurrences.²



Be careful of items that remain in “public view.”



Review search warrants carefully.



Avoid collecting immigration status information from patients. (More info below)



Establish private areas and indicate them via written policy and signage.



Reassure your patients that their information is protected.

Asking about Patient Immigration Status

Texas Executive Order GA-46, signed August 8, 2024, requires that public hospitals and acute care facilities ask about patients’ immigration status and report the healthcare costs of undocumented patients to the Texas Health and Human Services Commission.³ However, **patients are not required to answer this question**, and **patient care should not be affected** by the answer either way. Healthcare providers that are not covered under Texas Executive Order GA-46 should avoid asking about your patient’s immigration information. Further, **healthcare providers are not required to affirmatively enforce immigration laws**.

Printed informational cards about a patient’s rights with respect to this executive order can be requested from the [Decline to Answer TX](#) campaign, led by organizations across Texas.

Providers that do collect this information should take care to ensure storage and disclosure of that information is compliant under HIPAA which “generally prohibits the use or disclosure of patient information without the patient’s consent, except when required by law.”⁴

² This includes providing [know your rights cards](#) and informing them of their rights to remain silent and to an attorney while being questioned.

Know Your Rights: <https://www.ilrc.org/red-cards>

³ The Texas Immigration Law Council. “GA-46 Provider Memo,” available at: <https://linktr.ee/declinetoanswerTX>

⁴ National Immigration Law Center, “Health Care Providers and Immigration Enforcement” National Immigration Law Center, “Health Care Providers and Immigration Enforcement”

Healthcare Needs of the Immigrant Community

In the Greater Houston-Galveston Area

Community Landscape

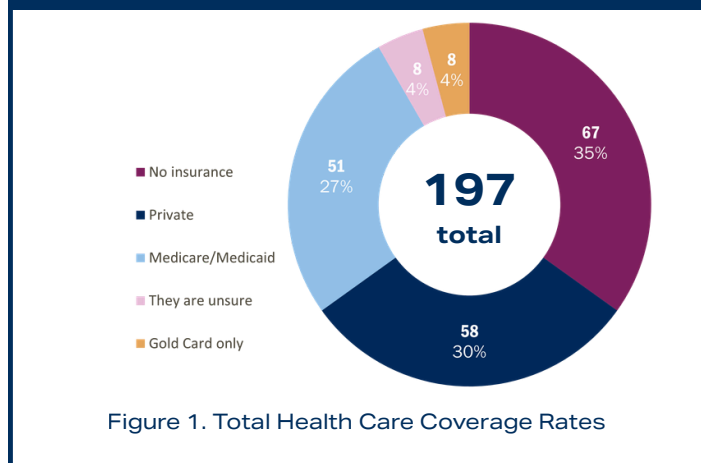
The Tahirih Justice Center, in partnership with local nonprofit organizations, collected survey data to provide a picture of barriers that immigrants in the Greater Houston area experience when accessing healthcare.

The immigrant population in the Greater Houston area is highly concentrated in Harris County, but rapidly expanding in surrounding counties. An estimated **one-third of immigrants** living in the Greater Houston area are **undocumented**.¹

Key Findings

1

Low-income immigrants in the Greater Houston area are **over four times more likely to be uninsured** than U.S. citizens, regardless of immigration status.



2

Spanish speakers in the Greater Houston area are **half as likely to have access to preventative care** as immigrants who speak English or Vietnamese.

Provider Type	Language		
	Vietnamese	Spanish	English
PCP	82%	51%	71%
Dental Care Provider	45%	35%	36%
Eye Care Provider	51%	35%	43%
All Providers	34%	20%	36%
No Providers	14%	36%	21%
Mental Health Access	10%	34%	67%

Figure 3. Provider Access by Language

¹ Randy Capps and Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, Migration Policy Institute (MPI), "A Profile of Houston's Diverse Immigrant Population in a Rapidly Changing Policy Landscape," available at: https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/HoustonImmigrantsProfile_FinalWeb.pdf

Healthcare Needs of the Immigrant Community

In the Greater Houston-Galveston Area

3

Financial barriers are at the heart of **where** and **how often** immigrants in the Greater Houston area seek care.

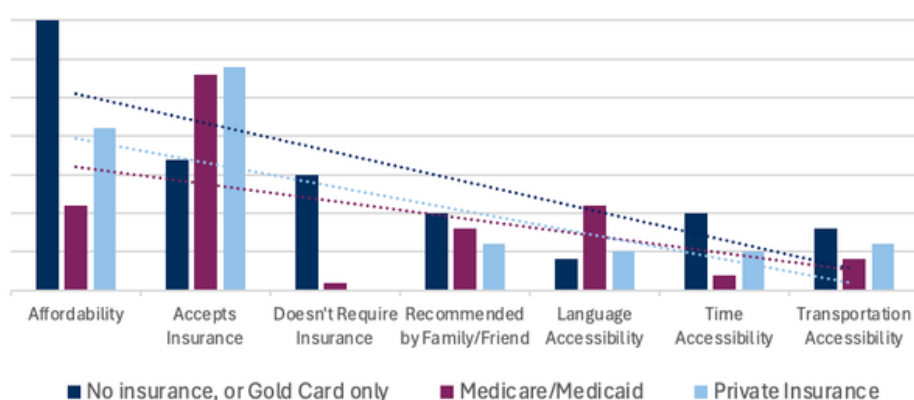


Figure 5. Factors Impacting Decisions on Where to Seek Care

Health literacy rates are particularly poor among lower-income Americans, including many with low English proficiency.

This puts both patients and health-care organizations at risk by compromising **efficacy, affordability, and safety**.

4

Among immigrant communities in Harris County, **the Harris Health Financial Assistance Program** bridges the gap in access to providers.

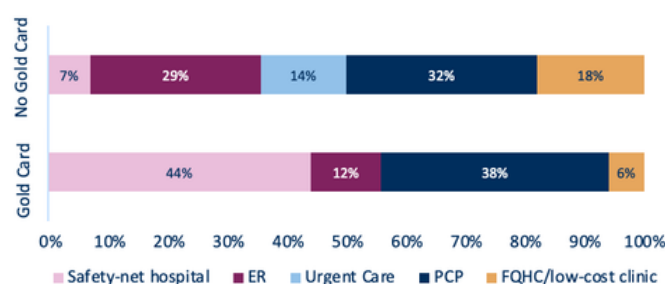


Figure 8. Gold Card Impact on Provider Choice in Harris County

5

There is a particular need for **affordable mental health** providers serving immigrant communities

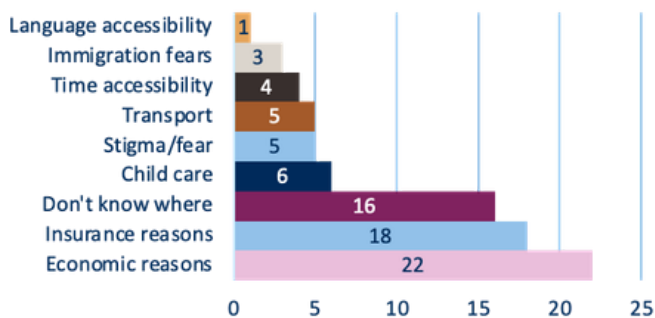


Figure 9. Reasons for Not Accessing Mental Healthcare

Supporting immigrant patients via **coverage eligibility, health resources, and preventive education** will help meaningfully improve medical outcomes.

To view our recommendations for providers based on the data and read the full report, follow the QR code.

