

FAQ: Navigating the DHS SAVE System

Understanding the “Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements” (SAVE) System and its Impact on Immigrants and Foreign-Born Citizens

The Trump Administration is making changes to the electronic system used to verify immigration status for public benefits purposes, known as the SAVE system. These actions could have an outsized effect, putting eligible people’s access to federal or state programs, and even voting, at risk.

This explainer covers what SAVE is, how the Administration is expanding its use in new and concerning ways, and what advocates can do when SAVE creates problems.

What is the SAVE System?

SAVE is an [online tool](#) run by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), which is part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Federal, state, local, territorial, and tribal agencies use SAVE to check a person’s immigration status when the person applies for certain benefits or licenses. SAVE can also be used to verify the status of some U.S. citizens (for example, some naturalized citizens or people who got citizenship through a parent), but it cannot reliably verify whether any given person is a citizen and was never intended to do so.

Congress required the government to create this kind of electronic system in 1986, in the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). Since then, SAVE has been used to help agencies verify immigration status for benefit and license programs. For example, state and local benefits agencies use SAVE to verify that applicants have an eligible immigration status for programs like Medicaid, SNAP, and the Affordable Care Act marketplaces.

SAVE is not itself a database that houses information about people’s status or citizenship. Instead, it searches other government databases and reports on whatever information is available at that time. SAVE responses do **not** indicate whether someone qualifies for a benefit or license. The agency that is offering the benefit or license is responsible for making that decision based on the information provided by SAVE and the many other factors that can apply depending on the program.

How does SAVE verification work?

Step 1 (Initial verification): A user at an eligible agency submits a [verification request](#) to SAVE. Agencies that use SAVE include state and local agencies that administer Medicaid or nutrition assistance benefits, driver’s and professional licenses, and other benefits. The request

usually includes the applicant's name and date of birth; the type of benefit or license the person is requesting; and at least one immigration ID or a Social Security Number (SSN). An immigration ID could be an A-number, a Form I-94 Arrival/Departure number, a receipt number, or some [other](#) immigration-related identifier. USCIS says that SAVE returns a response [within seconds](#). If successful, it will share the person's status and date it was granted. If SAVE cannot verify a person's status at Step 1, it might ask for more information. If a user provides only an SSN at Step 1 and SAVE cannot provide a response, SAVE will close the case.

Step 2 (Additional verification): If SAVE is unable to verify a person's status but the user provides an immigration ID number, SAVE will prompt the agency to take an additional step, including requesting additional information. This may require the applicant to provide additional documents.

Step 3 (Resubmit with Docs): SAVE will either return a response or move to Step 3, which requires the user to "Resubmit with Docs." This means the user must upload a copy of the applicant's immigration document(s). The user may have this already or will need to request it from the applicant. After the upload, SAVE should return a final response. As of [April 2026](#), these extra steps can take about 20 federal workdays.

Note: SAVE is designed to be a multi-step process, because not all relevant immigration information can be captured in an initial search.

SAVE's Transformation

The Trump Administration has expanded SAVE beyond the original role Congress envisioned, as a narrow tool for checking immigration status for benefits and licenses. In May 2025, DHS and the Social Security Administration (SSA) signed a data-sharing [agreement](#) that allows SAVE to search SSA databases. Previously, SAVE did not have access to SSA's data.

Normally, when the government starts using personal data in a new way, it must explain the legal basis and give the public notice. Here, the Administration did not publish the [notice](#) until October 2025, describing new SAVE features and new ways agencies can use the system. The notice said SAVE can now:

- ▶ Accept bulk uploads, instead of entering cases one at a time.
- ▶ Use new data, including passport numbers, driver's license numbers, and SSA data.
- ▶ Be used for purposes beyond benefits and licenses, including law enforcement or auditing, voter verification, and other uses.

Under these changes, SAVE can now pull information from more databases and may be used by more agencies than before. That means someone's information may be shared or used for other purposes later. There are also questions about whether SAVE is being used beyond its authorized scope. For example, some states have used SAVE for voter checks in the past, but they usually did not rely on SAVE alone, and many [stopped](#) using it because of errors.

These changes raise serious concerns in the voting rights context, particularly when states or local election officials use SAVE for voter roll registration verification, voter list maintenance, or other citizenship verification. Several states have begun using SAVE for these purposes, including [Texas](#), [Tennessee](#), and most recently [North Carolina](#). Public reporting indicates that at least 20 states and 45 local jurisdictions have [registered](#) with SAVE specifically for purposes of voter registration and voter list maintenance. In the registration and list-maintenance context, SAVE "no match" or "inconclusive" results can trigger demands for proof of citizenship or lead to removals from the rolls; close to an election, those errors might leave eligible voters without enough time to fix any issues before voting deadlines. States continue to use SAVE for these impermissible purposes, even while acknowledging noncitizen voting is not a widespread [problem](#) and despite experiencing significant error rates. In one Texas county verifying voter citizenship, about [one in four](#) people flagged as potential noncitizens were U.S. citizens. Litigation over information about SAVE's expansion has likewise underscored the substantial [risk](#) of erroneous voter disenfranchisement by using SAVE.

These expansions are a major shift in what SAVE is used for and raise significant privacy and legal concerns. Federal law gives several federal agencies including the Department of Health and Human Services the authority to determine how information obtained through the SAVE system can be used for purposes of the programs they administer; DHS and USCIS do *not* have this same authority (42 U.S.C. 1320b-7(a)(5)(B)). This means that DHS cannot unilaterally change SAVE's mission; any expansion beyond the benefit and license context must rely on clear statutory authority and include appropriate privacy safeguards.

SAVE is Not Reliable for Expanded Purposes

Government oversight bodies and other reports have established that SAVE has had serious limitations for years. USCIS often claims that SAVE has a low error rate, but this can be misleading, because it does not account for the fact that SAVE often cannot confirm a person's status correctly on the first try. GAO found that about [15 and 19](#) percent of SAVE requests need additional verification beyond the initial query. Although additional verification is not necessarily the same as a confirmed error, it is significant because if agencies fail to complete required follow-up, eligible applicants can be wrongly denied. GAO also found that DHS did not have strong enough checks to make sure that agencies complete the extra steps when needed, which distorts the error rate.

If a user receives no answer or a wrong answer during **initial verification (Step 1)** and stops there, an applicant may be denied a benefit or license improperly. Advocates should watch for delays, confusing responses, and cases where an agency doesn't request **additional verification (Step 2)** or misunderstands SAVE's response.

These problems may be getting worse as the use and scope of SAVE expands. DHS [began](#) rolling out updates while the system was still being changed, leading to widespread issues, including what some officials called "persistent mistakes."

Citizens born outside the United States are significantly more likely to be misidentified as noncitizens, because neither SSA nor DHS has a complete or definite record of all U.S. citizens. SSA has [acknowledged](#) that its records do not reliably reflect citizenship, and DHS does not maintain complete records on people who obtained citizenship through their parents or were born abroad to U.S. citizens.

Tips for Dealing with SAVE

Advocates and providers working with people whose information is run through SAVE can help by:

- Ensuring that their correct and most recent documentation and information are submitted.
- Helping individuals fix incorrect information in their records:
 - o **Double-check what the agency submitted:** Make sure the information the agency enters matches the person's documents.
 - o **USCIS typo:** If the problem is a clear USCIS typing error, submit a correction request [here](#).
 - o **USCIS record issue:** If the problem is in USCIS records and you need proof of what is correct, follow the instructions [here](#). This page also explains how to update or replace documents for other reasons.
 - o **Other document or agency record:** If the documentation contains errors (for example, a state ID), contact the agency that issued it to fix the record.
- Try to identify when an agency is misusing SAVE. If people you work with have their information input into SAVE, you can ask questions about why certain information or documentation is being required, or whether the agency has escalated the request to final verification.

Pushing Back Against Wrongful or Harmful Use of SAVE

Misuse of the SAVE process can seriously harm citizens, immigrants, and their families. When people understand how SAVE works, they can better protect people they work with and intervene when agencies misuse the system.

Impacted people, community members, and advocates can play a key role by spotting SAVE misuse, helping correct mistakes, holding agencies accountable, and pushing for clear limits and safeguards.

Remember what SAVE does not do. According to USCIS's own [website](#), SAVE does not:

- ▶ Determine eligibility for benefits or licenses.
- ▶ Provide employment eligibility verification.
- ▶ Share information provided by agencies for administrative (non-criminal) immigration enforcement.

SAVE is meant to be a limited tool to check immigration status for benefits and licenses.

It was not designed to decide who qualifies for benefits, who can vote, or anything else. Agencies—not SAVE—make eligibility decisions. SAVE cannot determine or verify whether a person is unlawfully present in the United States.

SAVE can be wrong, and it may rely on old information. It often has trouble identifying naturalized citizens, citizens born abroad, people who changed their names, and people with complex immigration histories. Sometimes eligibility for a benefit depends in part on someone's prior status, which will mean that agencies have to ask very specific questions to ensure they can get the correct information for determining eligibility.

When SAVE is wrong, the harm can be serious and hard to fix. People can lose important benefits like health coverage and food assistance. Using SAVE for voter checks risks disenfranchisement on a wide scale.

Expanding SAVE can increase immigration surveillance. New uses for the system mean more people (including immigrants) will have their data fed through it. The expansions can also increase data sharing and lead to new uses that go far beyond SAVE's original purpose. Given the Administration has betrayed longstanding data privacy protections and shared [Medicaid](#), [housing](#), and [tax filing](#) data with immigration enforcement, misuse of SAVE continues to degrade longstanding boundaries between enforcement agencies and health and public benefits agencies.

What Advocates and State and Local Governments Can Do

Agencies can adopt protective guardrails against SAVE expansion. Demand that agencies place clear limits and protections on the use of SAVE and information. For example, if your state is considering using SAVE in a non-mandatory program, advocate for information protections. Familiarize yourself with the guardrails found in the law creating the SAVE system (42 U.S.C. § 1320b-7).

- Entities participating in SAVE system must ensure that information is adequately protected against unauthorized disclosure for other purposes than allowed by the system. (42 U.S.C. § 1320b-7(a)(5)(B)).
- The law also requires that any verification processes protect an individual's privacy to the maximum extent possible, and that individuals have reasonable opportunity to submit evidence of their immigration status (42 U.S.C. § 1320b-7(d)).
- During the entire verification process, including the reasonable opportunity period for submitting documents, agencies using SAVE should not delay, deny, reduce, or terminate benefits to applicants who are otherwise eligible during the reasonable opportunity period and during the entire verification process (42 U.S.C. § 1320b-7(d)(4)).

Use these helpful protections as a starting point when advocating.

Ensure state and local benefits verification processes do not burden applicants. When agencies require applicants to submit additional details to verify their immigration status, applicants can see their benefits delayed or never receive them at all. The more times applicants must respond to agency communications, the easier it is for them to fall through the cracks due to missed mail or lack of resources to respond. Benefits administering agencies should avoid requesting additional documentation from applicants whenever possible and should instead use existing or otherwise accessible documents. When additional documents are necessary, communication should be provided in a clear, linguistically accessible manner with multiple follow-ups if needed.

Additional Resources

[USCIS Save Program Overview](#)

[DHS Privacy Impact Assessment](#) (October 2025 documenting detailing updates to SAVE)

[American Immigration Council SAVE Overview](#) and [Fact Sheet](#)

[ProPublica Investigation](#)

[GAO SAVE Report](#)

[Texas Tribune SAVE Investigation](#)

[Brennan Center Report](#)