



## Judge who blocked drug-testing welfare recipients dismissed conservative think tank report as evidence

- By Ashley Lopez | 10.25.11 /

A court [ordered](#) a temporary halt to Florida's controversial new law requiring welfare recipients to submit to a drug test before receiving benefits yesterday. In its decision, the court also dismissed a report by a newly formed conservative think tank, which the state had cited as part of its defense of the law.

According to court documents, the state (defendant David Wilkins, the Secretary of the Florida Department of Children & Families) submitted a report created by a "free market" public policy think tank in Naples called the Foundation for Government Accountability as part of its defense.

However, the court threw out the [group's report](#) yesterday, claiming it was "not competent expert opinion."

The News Service of Florida [reports](#) that Tarren Bragdon, the CEO of the Foundation for Government Accountability, was disappointed with the decision:

"Judge Scriven's ruling against Florida's drug-testing requirement for taxpayer-funded welfare cash is disappointing, and removes needed accountability from our welfare system," Bragdon said. "Our analysis of the law shows that the requirement is saving the state millions in welfare benefits, and helps ensure taxpayer dollars are reserved only for the truly needy."

The court's motion reads:

Though the State offers, as evidence of the cost savings, a pamphlet from the Foundation for Government Accountability entitled, The Impact of Florida's New Drug Test Requirement for Welfare Cash Assistance, the data contained in the pamphlet is not competent expert opinion, nor is it offered as such, nor could it be reasonably construed

as such. Tarren Bragdon, *The Impact of Florida's New Drug Test Requirement for Welfare Cash Assistance*, FOUNDATION FOR GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY, September 2011 at 1 (Dkt. 19-8 at 1.) Even a cursory review of certain assumptions in the pamphlet undermines its conclusions. Just by way of example, the pamphlet suggests that the State will save millions in the first year; but it arrives at this number by extrapolating from the 9.6 percent of TANF applications that are denied for “drug-related” reasons, including those who tested positive and those who declined to be tested. *Id.* at 1. It extends these hypothetical savings for the full year that a TANF applicant who tested positive for drugs would be subject to losing benefits.

Within the footnotes, the Foundation for Government Accountability is described as “a non-profit organization that ‘believes personal liberty and private enterprise are key to Florida’s economic future,’ ‘develops and promotes free market public policies that achieve limited, constitutional government and a robust economy that will be an engine for job creation across the state.’”

The group in question is not even a year old. The formation of the foundation, a “new free market think tank in Naples, Florida,” was announced in April of this year.

Sunshine State News [reported](#) in its announcement of the group:

“Individual freedom and private enterprise are the keys to Florida’s economic future,” said Tarren Bragdon, the president and CEO of the new group, on Thursday. “The Foundation for Government Accountability will be a resource for taxpayers and policymakers who seek a Florida booming with new entrepreneurs, well-educated children, a top-rate health care system, and an affordable, open government that protects freedom.”

The FGA will be tackling health care and government transparency, as well as economic and job growth.

“As government grows in size and complexity, and as people lose faith in their elected officials, it’s important that organizations exist to influence government on behalf of the taxpayers, and move the state toward common-sense reforms and a growing economy,” said Bragdon. “The Foundation for Government Accountability will give the public peace of mind that their financial security and personal freedom will be at the forefront of all policy debates.”

Bragdon certainly has the background to launch a think tank at the state level. His impressive background includes a long tenure with the Maine Heritage Policy Center as director of health reform initiatives and, eventually, CEO. From 1996 until 2000, he served in the Maine House of Representatives. Bragdon was 21 — by less than two weeks — when he was first elected, making him the youngest legislator in the state’s history (take that James G. Blaine, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and Hannibal Hamlin — yes, all the politicians I know from Maine are from the 19th century). Bragdon

also was a special assistant to Maine Senate President Richard Bennett after his stint in the House and oversaw Gov. Paul LePage's budget workgroup after the 2010 elections.

Maine Heritage Policy Center, Bragdon's former employer, [describes its mission](#) as formulating and promoting "conservative public policies based on the principles of free enterprise; limited, constitutional government; individual freedom; and traditional American values—all for the purpose of providing public policy solutions that benefit the people of Maine."

According to SourceWatch, the group has received big donations from conservative groups in the past. For example, "in its 2006 annual report the [Cato Institute](#) states that it made a grant of \$50,000 to the Maine Heritage Policy Center," [SourceWatch reports](#). The Cato Institute was founded in 1977 by Edward H. Crane and Charles Koch. Koch is one of the conservative and influential billionaire Koch brothers.

Bragdon has an interesting history in Maine. At the age 21, Bragdon became the state's youngest state representative ever elected. [According to the \*Portland Press Herald\*](#), after years in the legislature, Bragdon "worked for five years as the Maine Heritage Policy Center's part-time director of health reform initiatives, before taking over as CEO in January of 2008."

[The \*Portland Press Herald\* reported](#) that "according to the organization's tax filings, Bragdon earned \$136,208 in salary and other compensation in 2009."

The *Press Herald* also reported that Bragdon was later the "co-chair of Gov. Paul LePage's transition team ... [and] played a major role in writing LePage's proposed budget for the next two years."

Besides contributing research for Florida's [defense of its drug testing law](#), Bragdon has also written in [support of the state](#) turning down millions of dollars from the health care reform law during his short time here.