

THE DEPAUW

Drug testing for welfare: misguided and discriminatory

By: Shelby Bremer – Tuesday 12, 2013

The Indiana state legislature is making national news again, this time because the House recently passed House Bill 1483, which proposes drug testing certain recipients of TANF (Temporary Aid for Needy Families), commonly called “welfare.”

This bill requires all applicants to take a written test to screen for likelihood of drug abuse or addiction, and mandates that at least 50 percent of those who fail be subject to random drug testing. Should they fail a test, they can continue to receive benefits, but only if they enter a treatment program at their own expense.

While some legislators say that public opinion on this bill in their districts is actually rather favorable, this measure is ineffective, discriminatory and downright wrong.

Representative Jud McMillin introduced this legislation as a way to be a “good steward of taxpayer money,” but it’s just the opposite. The fiscal impact statement on this bill places costs at nearly \$2.8 million, and predicts that it will likely only withhold just under \$1.6 million from ineligible recipients — a much higher estimate than has actually been found in similar programs in other states. Regardless, \$911,000 of these savings would be used to pay for drug tests, meaning that this program could have an extra net cost to taxpayers of at least \$1.19 million. This hardly qualifies as being responsible with Hoosier wallets.

The legislative debate over TANF in Indiana reflects the hard-edged national discourse surrounding welfare. Those who support measures like H.B. 1483 say that they don’t want taxpayer money being used to buy anything for which it was not intended. But this bill has no provisions to ensure that TANF benefits won’t be spent on things like private jets, luxury vacations or golf outings.

Actually, that sounds a bit more like corporate executive bonuses, paid for by billions of dollars in tax exemptions every year. The \$4 billion of government money that indirectly funded Enron could have been used for five full years of TANF benefits for 231,481 families with three children.

In 2012, the libertarian Cato Institute combed through the federal budget and found that the government gave nearly \$100 billion in direct and indirect subsidies to businesses across the board. I believe our businesses should benefit from a healthy infrastructure, but it’s hypocritical to call that good fiscal policy, then turn and point the finger of blame at those employing our social safety net.

Additionally, research has shown that TANF recipients are hardly more likely to abuse drugs than any other demographic and are actually less likely to abuse alcohol. This underscores the ineffectiveness of proposals like H.B. 1483.

We need to stop disparaging the poor while celebrating “job creators,” because the reality is that corporate welfare is far costlier to your wallet than any social aid programs ever will be. If we’re going to drug test TANF recipients, then let’s test legislators, CEO’s of companies receiving subsidies, college students on financial aid and anyone else using taxpayer money. As active members of society, we should examine the way our tax dollars are spent, but we don’t need to start with aid programs for the poorest of the poor.

If we truly wanted to identify and help those who need it, the money for this system could be much better spent on drug abuse education and rehabilitation. Substance abuse is a health crisis we must solve together, not a crime committed by solely the lowest tax bracket, and punitive measures like H.B. 1483 are not the place to start.

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