

Mississippi welfare drug-testing bill about to be put to the test

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Mississippi is the latest state to enact welfare drug-testing, but will it work, or is it just grandstanding?

“The TANF [Temporary Assistance to Needy Families] program is a safety net for families in need, and adding this screening process will aid adults who are trapped in a dependency lifestyle so they can better provide for their children,” Mississippi Gov. Phil Bryant said in a news release. “This measure will help make a positive difference for families impacted by substance abuse.”

Bryant passed the welfare drug-testing bill on Monday and the state will begin screening applicants on July 1. The bill requires the applicant to complete a questionnaire, take a drug screening, receive treatment for substance abuse if applicable, and test negative for future screenings. Without following these rules, the adult would not receive cash assistance through TANF and would be ineligible for the first 90 days after the occurrence, and 12 months after the second occurrence.

Capt. Ken Chapman, regional coordinator and corps officer for the Salvation Army in Jackson, Miss., said that around 51 percent of Mississippi’s population receive some form of government aid. If the people working outnumber the people receiving and out of work, the system will break down, he says.

“So I see this as a step forward in trying to get people more responsive and back in the productivity,” Chapman told The Daily Caller. “I think that’s the goal that the government is trying to achieve, and as a social service organization, we support that. It’s not about condemning people; it’s actually about tough love and giving people a hand up than a handout.”

States moving to welfare drug-testing bills to monitor drug use among welfare recipients are “not dealing with the real problems of the welfare system,” said Michael Tanner, senior fellow at the Cato Institute who researches social welfare policy, Social Security and health-care reform.

“It’s not that we have a good welfare program that people are abusing, it’s that we have a bad welfare program,” Tanner said. “Is this a bad bill? No, but it’s really taking the easy way out. It’s not dealing with the real problems of the welfare system.”

States across the country are considering the welfare drug-testing bill, which if passed, would allow welfare programs to drug test individuals after completion of a questionnaire assessing substance abuse risk, provide two-month treatment, and disqualify people from the program after subsequent drug use.

The Mississippi Department of Human Services reported in their [2013 annual fiscal report](#) that TANF's average monthly payments to families is about \$140 each, and to an individual is about \$66. Statewide average monthly payments reached \$1,460,034. The Department of Human Services handled 10,464 family cases monthly and 21,907 people's cases monthly. The average claim collections through TANF were \$25,777 out of the 363 claims established for "benefits improperly received."

[According to](#) Mississippi Sen. Terry Burton, the bill will cost around \$36,000 — but if every applicant is a substance abuser, it could cost as much as \$291,000.

Tanner said he thinks the bill doesn't have a lot of benefits beyond "showboating or grandstanding." The real problem with welfare programs are that they make poverty more comfortable, instead of finding ways to get people out of poverty. He says the fundamental issue with welfare is that "people are responding to the incentives that the program creates."

"We know that the answers to poverty are a job, avoiding pregnancy if you're not married, and finishing school. Essentially, if you can do those three things, you cannot be poor. So, we should be focused on solutions to those problems, not giving people who are poor enough money so that they can somehow thrive in poverty," Tanner said.

These laws and regulations will work in Mississippi, as opposed to other states, said Chapman, because the drug-testing forces people to be responsible and change their habits. He said the Salvation Army's shelters already test using breathalyzers, but because they "serve a God of second chances," they will give them a chance to come clean and realize they need help.

"That's going to make a big statement," Chapman said. "And it will probably take a few dozen to start to get the message. The real test of this is will they actually stand by and enforce it? Once you've done that to a couple dozen people, word gets out really quickly, and they begin to clean up."

According to Tanner, with the start of electronic benefit transfer (EBT) payment cards and the cash benefits provided through TANF, high profile news stories showcase the abuse of welfare being used in liquor stores, strip clubs, and anything with a cash machine. It's understandable that taxpayers would be upset with this sort of spending, but the bill must be measured in comparison to the context and proportion of the bigger problems in welfare programs, he said.

"And the reality is, look, if we're going to go after drug testing for people who get welfare benefits, then I think we can apply the same criteria to people in any number of government benefits," Tanner said.

Drug testing for welfare benefits isn't new. Since the renovation of the welfare system in 1996, various states already imposed tests for applicants to TANF. However, few actually tested applicants for drugs until five years ago, [USAToday reports](#).

Michigan paved the way in 2003 with a ruling that disallowed drug testing of all applicants to the program. In December, a federal judge removed the drug-testing requirement in Florida, and some are skeptical about other states using a similar program when its promises of savings and deterred drug users came up empty. Only 2.6 percent of 4,086, or 108 people, failed the test in the four months the bill was used. The cost to the state was \$118,140, costing the government an extra \$45,780, [according to The New York Times](#).

Indiana recently struck down this same bill in the Senate, with opposition saying that it unfairly targeted the poor, [reports The IndyStar](#). However, in Alabama this bill passed with limits, having applicants with felony or misdemeanor convictions for drug possession or distribution in the last five years tested. The sponsor of the bill, Republican Sen. Trip Pittman, said in [The Washington Times](#) that this legislation would give drug users incentive to stop and show that the legislature is accountable for their spending.