

Michigan to begin drug testing of welfare recipients

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The state of Michigan announced Thursday it will be the first in the United States to require drug testing for those applying for welfare benefits. Officials from the State Family Independence Agency (FIA) announced that testing will begin in five districts in the state, including impoverished areas in Detroit.

The new measure, signed into law earlier this year, will require applicants under 65 years of age to take a drug test or forfeit their chance for benefits. The state will also randomly test those already receiving benefits in the targeted districts. According to the FIA, testing will be extended statewide by 2003.

Applicants who fail a test will be required to take a second one. If they fail again they will be compelled to get treatment. Those who refuse treatment will be cut off within four months.

Opponents have pointed out that the measure is a violation of the Constitution's Fourth Amendment prohibiting unreasonable search and seizure. "The state is starting from the assumption that the poor are criminals," said Kary Moss, an official of the Michigan chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, which plans to challenge the law. "The state is saying that if you want money for food and shelter you have to give up the Fourth Amendment rights that others have."

Earlier in the year Michigan's legislature mandated the checking of welfare recipients' fingerprints, allegedly to prevent fraud. Sharon Parks, senior research associate for the Michigan League of Human Services, said "people are not going to want to come to the welfare office for services of any kind." Other critics have said drug testing could lead to some parents losing custody of their children.

Michigan officials have made little attempt to conceal their aim of driving the remaining welfare recipients off the benefit rolls. Governor John Engler said, "Drugs are

a barrier to employment. These pilots are consistent with our goal to help welfare recipients become truly independent from the welfare system." He might have added that the new program would also help the poor become "independent" of food, shelter and other basic necessities.

Spearheaded by the Republican governor, whose efforts have been praised by President Clinton, Michigan has established itself as one of the leaders in the attack on welfare. Michigan has had a 60 percent drop in welfare caseloads since 1992, from 225,359 to 89,866. The state has established a "Project Zero" plan, aimed at stopping all welfare payments in selected districts.

Many states have considered drug-testing programs for welfare recipients but have delayed because of opposition by civil libertarians, social workers and advocates for the poor. Florida tests applicants when it claims there is a reasonable suspicion of drug use. Four states—New Jersey, Minnesota, South Carolina and Wisconsin—carry out random drug test of welfare recipients with felony drug convictions.



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