

Michigan welfare benefits cut to 48 months

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The Michigan state Senate approved a bill that would establish a lifetime limit of 48 months for receiving welfare benefits. It is estimated that 12,600 families in the state will be affected immediately.

Republican Governor Rick Snyder is expected to sign the bill into law as soon as it arrives on his desk. The 48-month limit will be applied retroactively, meaning affected families will lose an average of \$515 a month beginning on October 1.

The bill in its rough form was previously passed by the lower house and will be presented to Snyder after some “technical” edits. It will then go to the House for approval when the session opens on July 27. A spokesperson for Republican House Speaker Jase Bolger said that approval will be just a formality. “This has been a priority of our caucus since day one,” he said.

The signing of the bill into law will make Michigan one of the US states with the most draconian conditions for families hardest hit by the economy.

In an interview on a Michigan talk radio station, Judy Putnam of the Michigan League for Human Services said that the state will have the harshest welfare time limits in the Midwest. “A lot of these folks are working,” she said. “They just don’t make enough money to even leave the cash assistance rolls.”

She added, “And you don’t have to make a lot—I think about \$814 a month for a family of three. After you make that much money you are no longer getting assistance. So a lot of people are trying. We know that there are a lot of low-paying jobs out there.”

The president and CEO of the Michigan League for Human Services, Gilda Jacobs, warned that the state would be unprepared to deal with the thousands left destitute as a result of the measure.

The state legislature had previously cut unemployment benefits from 26 weeks to 20 weeks and reduced the earned income tax credit for working poor.

(See “Michigan cuts unemployment benefits”)

The cash benefit program is used to pay for housing, utilities and other essentials. Federal funding is provided under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, which is administered by the states. TANF was the name given to the program when the Clinton administration ended the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program in his bid to “end welfare as we know it” in 1996. With that change, a 60-month limit on receiving benefits was applied for the first time.

Six other states—Illinois, Iowa, Ohio, Minnesota, Missouri and Wisconsin—have already reduced the 60-month limit to 48 months. Indiana has a 24-month limit, but with no time limit on cash benefits for children.

Michigan is among the hardest hit by the economic crisis. Official unemployment has been over 10 percent since December 2008—more than 30 months. Actual figures are much higher and several counties have over 25 percent jobless.

In the face of brutal conditions facing families, Amber McCann, spokeswoman for Senate Majority Leader Randy Richardville, declared, “The purpose of the 48-month limit is to ensure that resources are directed toward families that truly need them.” She added callously, “As the economy in Michigan improves with the legislation that has passed over the course of these first six months, we think that 48 months is an adequate amount of time for people to find employment.”

The measure is provoking widespread anger in the population. In an interview with the Oakland County *Daily Tribune*, Ignatius Mays of Pontiac said, “I think it’s a shame because first of all we’ve been in a recession for years. It’s not like Michigan is just now going into it. We’ve been in a recession for seven years—four years before the rest of the country.

“It seems like there’s no help around here. That’s kind of hurtful for the people.

“A lot of it doesn’t make sense all around. The whole system is kind of crazy. And then to even cut off what little there is to help the people. That’s ridiculous.”

In addition to the generalized assault on the terms of cash assistance programs by state governments across the country, some states are pursuing reactionary efforts to tighten eligibility and criminalize welfare applicants. Republican Governor Rick Scott of Florida and Democratic Governor Jay Nixon of Missouri both signed legislation mandating drug testing for all welfare applicants.

Scott told CNN in an interview, “It’s not right for taxpayer money to be paying for somebody’s drug addiction. On top of that, this is going to increase personal responsibility, personal accountability. We shouldn’t be subsidizing people’s addiction.”

The Florida ACLU will likely file suit against the law. In 1999, under Michigan Governor John Engler, a similar law was overturned by a federal court when it was ruled unconstitutional.



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