

Bills in Kansas and Missouri target public aid recipients

Shannon Jones
9 April 2015

The US states of Kansas and Missouri are moving toward enactment of reactionary and vindictive measures directed against those receiving public aid under the mantra of encouraging “personal responsibility.”

The Republican-dominated Kansas legislature has approved a bill that would impose limits on the items and services welfare recipients could purchase with state assistance dollars. The list of prohibitions includes visits to swimming pools, alcohol, gambling, nail salons, spas, horse racing and cruises. The measure also imposes a maximum \$25 per day limit on ATM withdrawals and cuts the amount of time families can receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) from 48 months to 36 months.

Meanwhile, in neighboring Missouri, the state’s Republican-controlled House of Representatives has voted for a bill that would limit the kind of items that can be purchased with food stamps. Included in the long list of banned items are cookies, chips, soft drinks, seafood and steak. Rick Brattin, the legislator who sponsored the bill, told the *Washington Post*, “I have seen people purchasing filet mignons and crab legs with their EBT [electronic benefit transfer] cards. When I can’t afford it on my pay, I don’t want people on the taxpayers’ dime to afford those kinds of food either.”

The measures are designed to stigmatize and humiliate aid recipients under conditions of widespread and pervasive poverty, including high levels of child poverty, in both states and across the United States. The restrictions are doubly vindictive given the miserly amount of state aid available.

In Kansas the TANF program offers a family of three a maximum of \$429 per month in cash benefits. Under the new restrictions, which are expected to be signed into law this week and take effect July 1, a family

would have to go to the ATM 18 times to withdraw its full cash allotment, making timely payment of bills such as rent difficult if not impossible. Kansas distributes TANF benefits on government issued debit cards.

The reduction in time limits for those receiving state aid in Kansas is particularly onerous. Most states have a 60-month lifetime limit on benefits, the maximum under the rules of so-called welfare reform signed by Democratic President Bill Clinton in 1996. About one-third of states have shorter limits, with Arizona limiting aid to just 12 months.

In Missouri a qualifying individual can receive a maximum of \$194 a month in food stamps, with an average benefit of \$128 per person. The minimum monthly benefit is just \$7. According to the US Department of Agriculture 17 percent of households in the state are food insecure, meaning “they lacked access to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members.” An additional 8 percent of households are considered very low food secure.

The move by Kansas to impose restrictions on the use of TANF benefits comes at a time when enrollment in the program is declining due to pre-existing eligibility restrictions and time limits. The number of those in Kansas receiving benefits declined from 38,000 in 2011 to just 15,000 last year.

However, there has been no corresponding decline in poverty. According to Kids Count, 19 percent of children in Kansas live in poverty. A state report showed that 10,378 public school students in Kansas were homeless during the 2013-2014 school year. That represented an 11 percent increase from the previous school year.

In 2014, for the first time, more than 50 percent of Kansas public school students qualified for free school

lunches based on federal poverty guidelines. Under state rules children belonging to a family of four with annual income less than \$31,000 qualify for free lunches.

In Missouri the child poverty rate stands at 23 percent, with an overall poverty rate of 16 percent. About 416,000 children live in families receiving food stamps.

While the idea of public aid recipients feasting on filet mignon or idling their time on Caribbean cruises is absurd on its face, behind the new guidelines lies a nationwide campaign to vilify and criminalize the poor. The Missouri and Kansas rules are the latest in a nationwide trend targeting lower income families.

In 2012 the Obama administration imposed a rule banning the use of electronic benefit cards for gaming, adult entertainment or liquor. Many states have imposed their own restrictions.

According to the National Council of State Legislatures at least 12 states have enacted laws requiring drug testing or screening for public assistance. Most of the states are in the US South or Southwest. At least 14 more states have proposed legislation requiring drug testing or screening. Among the states enacting a drug-screening requirement is Michigan, with Republican Governor Rick Snyder signing a bill in December that requires the department of Human Services to establish a suspicion-based pilot drug-screening program in at least three counties. Those who test positive for drugs will have the cost of the tests deducted from their benefits.

While states have spent millions on drug testing, the actual number of positive tests has been negligible. For example, out of 2,783 tests administered in Kansas, only 11 showed drug use. Other states have reported similar results.



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