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## Bill would require drug testing for R.I. welfare recipients

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*Elizabeth Earls, left, president of the Rhode Island Council of Community Mental Health Organizations, talks with Linda Katz, policy director of The Poverty Institute, while waiting to testify Thursday in opposition to the drug-testing bill.*

PROVIDENCE — Welfare recipients who use illegal drugs would lose access to cash benefits if Peter Palumbo has his way.

The Cranston representative has introduced legislation that would require almost 7,000 low-income Rhode Islanders on welfare and their immediate adult family members to pass urine tests.

“We need to save money any way we can save money,” Palumbo said in a phone interview hours before his proposal was scheduled for review by the House Finance Committee. “I’m confident we’ll be able to find a lot of money that’s being misused.... I don’t have firsthand knowledge, but you hear of stories that they’re selling food stamps to get drugs and things of that nature. I’m convinced that it’s happening.”

Among the more conservative Democrats on Smith Hill, Palumbo acknowledged that his bill may need to be tweaked to pass constitutional muster.

“Clearly this legislation is unconstitutional for it would require testing of all welfare recipients without any cause or reasonable suspicion,” Amy Vitale, representative of the Rhode Island affiliate of the American Civil Liberties Union said in written testimony. “In fact, when Michigan passed mandatory drug testing for welfare in 1997 their law was nearly instantly challenged and subsequently declared unconstitutional.”

Social welfare advocates blasted the proposal during the evening hearing, in which Palumbo — who said he was suffering from an illness — was noticeably absent. No one spoke in support of the plan, which was cosponsored by Cranston Democratic Representatives Robert B. Jacquard and Charlene M. Lima, and Rep. Arthur J. Coverse, D-North Providence.

Elizabeth V. Earls, president of the Rhode Island Council of Community Mental Health Organizations, said the change would further stigmatize the welfare program and unfairly target poor people. More affluent beneficiaries of other government programs, such as tax credits, aren't subject to drug testing, Vitale noted.

And in addition to doubting the reliability of drug tests, Poverty Institute Policy Director Linda Katz questioned whether the legislation would meet Palumbo's goal to save money.

Aside from administrative costs, Rhode Island taxpayers will pay nothing this year to fund the welfare program now dubbed "Rhode Island Works." The program sent cash payments to 6,799 families (a total of 16,667 adults and children) in February, according to the Department of Human Services.

The monthly payments — \$485.10 on average for a family of three — are completely paid for with federal dollars. Overall, the federal government is expected to spend \$45.7 million this year on Rhode Island's welfare program, according to budget figures adopted by state officials in November.

"If he's looking to make any savings in terms of general revenue, there's no savings to be had because we're not spending a penny," Katz said. "We're not giving any families any state dollars."

Palumbo's proposal, which surfaced this year for the first time, would actually cost the state money, according to the Carcieri administration.

"Although DHS realizes that this legislation is well-intentioned, the department has serious concerns about the costs to implement this initiative," wrote Erin E. Casey, legislative liaison for the Executive Office of Health and Human Services.

The cost of monthly drug testing for an estimated 8,000 adults could be between \$2.4 million and \$7.2 million, depending on the kind of testing used, according to Casey's statement, which was submitted to the Finance Committee.

"These costs do not include the need for additional personnel, space and equipment to process the testing," Casey wrote. "Decisions would have to be made as to facilities [one central location or testing at each field office] before those operating costs could be determined, but they could be significant."

Meanwhile, in the phone interview, Palumbo acknowledged that his legislation faces an uphill battle.

"If I can't make an amended version fly, we'll have to come back another day. But at least it'll be a start," he said. "Very few bills pass the first time around."

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