

NEW BILL MANDATES COMPULSORY DRUG SCREENING FOR WELFARE APPLICANTS



Welfare applicants in Oklahoma will, following the passing of a new law, have to submit to screening for illegal drug use. A bill legalizing this rule was signed on Wednesday by Republican Governor Mary Fallin. Earlier the Oklahoma House of Representatives had passed the bill on a bipartisan 86-6 vote. Oklahoma becomes the fourth state, after Utah, Georgia and Tennessee, to approve such a measure. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 14 other states have similar proposals that are pending legal approval. The law, which is to take effect on November 1, makes it mandatory for adults who apply for benefits to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, to submit themselves for screening to qualify for the benefits. Failure to comply with the rules, or failing the tests, will make them ineligible for receiving the benefits. However, those applicants who fail the test and test positive for illegal drug use can undergo treatment and re-apply after 6 months. Children and underage parents will be exempted from drug screening and an alternate recipient may be named in case the parents have been refused benefits. State Rep. Guy Liebmann, R-Oklahoma City said, "Oklahomans sympathize and want to help those who are truly needy, but hate the idea that their taxes would go to pay for illegal drug activity and addiction. An added benefit of the bill is that it encourages addicts to undergo substance abuse treatment in order to qualify for TANF assistance." Liebmann further said, "In working on the legislation throughout session, we were able to address a number of concerns that it would have a negative effect on law-abiding applicants. I think what we have come up with a bill that reduces the burden on law-abiding applicants, but will still ensure tax dollars are not funding drug use." In a statement Gov. Fallin said, "Hard working taxpayers shouldn't be asked to subsidize drug abuse, and this bill will help to ensure they are not." State Rep. Sean Roberts said the bill is "good common-sense legislation." Democrats had opposed the measure, when it was first passed by the Oklahoma House in March. Democrats opposed to it attached an amendment, saying that the bill should also require all candidates for public office in Oklahoma to undergo a drug test. The bill could not clear the Senate hurdle. Many states have proposed the drug-testing of welfare recipients. Michigan was the first state to do so, but its law was struck down in an appeals court as unconstitutional. Florida approved a similar law last year, but a government judge blocked it temporarily. Arizona and Missouri also approved similar laws last year.

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