

Mistrusting the poor

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[This is an expanded version of an earlier post, giving it a national perspective.—Betty]

The Massachusetts legislature has decided that the poor can't be trusted with money, and a legislative commission has considered not allowing recipients of food stamps (now called SNAP, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and recipients of welfare (TAFDC) to use cash for any of their purchases (such as paying the rent), and issuing vouchers instead.

The legislature has already passed a law that doesn't allow people who receive cash on their Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards to pay for liquor, lottery tickets, casinos, or strip clubs. They are worried about people using EBT cards in other states, even though SNAP is a federal program administered by the United States Department of Agriculture and EBT cards can be used in all states. In order to avoid stigmatizing food stamp recipients, USDA said that an EBT card should be no different from any other credit card. When a member of the EBT Commission proposed to put a photo ID on EBT cards, a representative of retail stores said that this would be a nightmare because every shopper would have to have a photo ID, which the cashier would have to inspect.

EBT cards can be used for food, or they can be cashed if a person receives welfare payments (TAFDC). Most people use cash to pay landlords, child care, or transportation. The SNAP program doesn't allow any purchases except food (e.g., no household supplies or liquor).

Mistrust of the poor is widespread throughout the country. Across the nation, lawmakers have proposed legislation to implement asset limits for food-stamp recipients, longer waiting periods for welfare benefits, and mandatory substance abuse counseling for people receiving housing assistance. At least 10 states are considering bills that would require photo identification for EBT cards. At least two states — Ohio and Tennessee — are considering restricting or eliminating eligibility for those convicted of drug felonies. (That would, of course, punish their children.) At least two states —North Carolina and New Jersey— are considering requiring people to perform community service to receive government help.

Twenty-three states are considering drug testing for welfare recipients. Drug testing was proposed in Wyoming, but rejected by the legislature. It was also rejected by the Virginia and Indiana legislatures. Oklahoma passed the law. Florida passed the law and the ACLU is challenging it. Arizona and Missouri require testing for anyone they "reasonably suspect of illegal drug use."

Mitt Romney says drug testing for welfare recipients is an "excellent idea." Newt Gingrich considers drug testing a way to curb drug use and lower costs to public programs. He also advocates drug testing for unemployment compensation and food stamps.

Research shows that welfare recipients are no more likely than the general population to use drugs.

Conservatives would like to eliminate all safety net programs, including Social Security and Medicare. In order to do that, they begin by means-testing programs. Then they stigmatize the means-tested programs and cut them. Demeaning programs such as drug testing result in fewer people applying for the program. Conservatives have proposed a means test for Social Security and Medicare, which is their first step toward cutting or eliminating them. If Social Security is means-tested, I wouldn't be surprised if some legislator proposes to require drug testing of all retirees and

prohibiting them from buying liquor or lottery tickets, or going to casinos or strip clubs.