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## Drug testing for welfare recipients?

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Utahns on state and federal assistance programs may find themselves subject to random drug testing.

That proposal was aired Wednesday afternoon before the Workforce Services and Community and Economic Development Interim Committee. The committee took no action, but revealed clearly the notion is anything but cut and dried.

Sen. Dennis Stowell, R-Parowan, said one of his constituents came to him concerned that it is not fair that those on government assistance are not subject to the same substance abuse testing practices and consequences for those who are employed. In so many words, Stowell asked, why can't someone on welfare lose benefits for the same thing?

First of all, the welfare system implied by the question hasn't existed for 13 years, said Sen. Luz Robles, D-Salt Lake, whose constituency includes many families who receive temporary government support and cash payments. They, like anyone who receives assistance nationwide, are on a lifetime maximum cash-assistance limit of five years.

Plus, the idea of adding another barrier to people who are "desperately trying to get back on their feet with help from these programs" defies societal, economic and even common sense, particularly given the fact that lawmakers have just imposed deep budget cuts on substance abuse treatment and prevention programs, Robles said.

Robles and other committee members agreed that taking up the proposal in any serious, deliberate way first requires them to be clear on intent and what good it would do.

It's already doing some good if it initiates the long-avoided but much-needed discussion among lawmakers to honestly assess the role and relationship state and federal government in dealing with poverty, said Sen. Mark Madsen, R-Lehi. He called the implications of dealing with the issue much more far-reaching than drug testing itself.

Rep. Steve Mascaró, R-West Jordan, endorsed discussing the measure further but advised fellow lawmakers that the argument for imposing a behavioral expectations of the employer/employee relationship on a segment of the population in the margins of society — especially when random testing is being viewed by many courts across the country as a violation of the Fourth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution — "has a long way to go to persuade me."

According to Community Action Partnership Utah, a network of advocates who coordinate services and help people in poverty, there are about 6,500 Utahns who receive cash assistance through the Temporary Assistance for Need Families federal block grant, or the Family Employment Program, as it is now called in Utah. A demographic profile of the recipients by CAPU shows that 94 percent are single women, 74 percent are white and more than 60 percent have children. They each receive \$498 a month.

Melissa Smith, a government policy analyst for CAPU, said the those receiving assistance have

no greater substance abuse problems than the 4.9 percent rate among Utah's general population. No state has imposed random drug testing on this group, according to Smith and the state Department of Workforce Services, which oversees the program for Utah.

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