



Jewish Community
Relations Council
MILWAUKEE
JEWISH FEDERATION



WISCONSIN
FAITH
VOICES
FOR JUSTICE

Wisconsin
Jewish
Conference



TO: Members, Joint Committee on Finance
FROM: Tom Heinen, Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee
Elana Kahn-Oren, Jewish Community Relations Council, Milwaukee
Rev. Cindy Crane, Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin
Linda Ketcham, Madison-area Urban Ministry
John Huebscher, Wisconsin Catholic Conference
Rev. Scott D. Anderson, Wisconsin Council of Churches
Rabbi Bonnie Margulis, Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice
Michael Blumenfeld, Wisconsin Jewish Conference
Sandra A. Milligan, WISDOM
DATE: April 16, 2015
RE: Drug Testing Provisions in 2015-17 Budget

As representatives of a broad diversity of Wisconsin faith communities, we ask you to reject the proposal in the 2015-17 Budget to institute or expand drug testing for FoodShare, BadgerCare, employment programs and Unemployment Insurance.

We do so because of our shared commitment to respect, compassion, and fairness for all persons. In our respective religious traditions poverty and joblessness are not indicators of bad character. Thus, we do not believe it is just to craft policies that punish those who face these trials while also suffering from the illness of addiction.

Nor is it fair to treat those who seek employment, health and nutritional assistance differently than those who need financial help with educational costs, starting a business or obtaining child care. Drug abuse occurs at all income levels. Tying drug testing only to certain forms of public assistance unjustly holds those applicants to a higher standard of accountability than the rest of us.

The stated intent of these provisions is to see that people get treatment if they need it, and to ensure that they are employable. We share this goal and our charitable organizations do what they can to attain it. Still we must ask: Will requiring drug screening and testing for public assistance applicants really advance those goals? We see many reasons to doubt it.

Subjecting applicants for federal assistance to drug screening and testing only because they are dealing with poverty or loss of income is degrading and humiliating. It adds to the stigma of applying for public assistance. Moreover, it may discourage some from seeking the very help they and their families need.

The budget bill does not specify whether the drug screening, testing, and sanctions would apply to parents who apply for Unemployment Insurance or FoodShare Employment and Training (for BadgerCare applicants, only childless adults would be subject to testing). This raises the possibility that children would be deprived of food and other necessities because of a parent's drug problem.

Drug addiction is not simply a matter of moral weakness. It is rather a chronic illness that requires ongoing support and treatment. Nor is it a relatively simple problem that can be solved with one or two courses of treatment. It is often closely intertwined with mental illness, making it especially difficult to treat.

Our faith communities have extensive experience in supporting and operating programs that serve persons in need, including those with drug abuse problems. We know how long the road to recovery can be, and how many ups and downs, reversals and new beginnings typically occur along the way.

The budget bill specifies that, for certain employment programs, a person who tests positive for drug use must participate in substance abuse treatment and submit to random testing in order to remain eligible. If that person tests positive again, he or she can restart treatment only once and remains eligible only so long as no further tests are positive. (The bill does not specify what would happen in the other programs for which drug testing is proposed.) To provide only one second chance is neither realistic nor fair.

We are also acutely aware of the limited availability of treatment programs for persons of modest means. We know that many of those programs lack adequate funding, and we know how long the waiting lists are. It is likely, therefore, that many persons who are jobless or in poverty would be simply punished, rather than helped, by this policy.

We also do not believe that this policy will benefit the state as a whole. Depriving people of food, medical care, job training, or unemployment insurance will not improve the health, safety, or economic vitality of our communities. Instead, it will weaken our communities by increasing poverty, food insecurity, and health care costs.

Nor is this policy wise stewardship of scarce public resources. Other states have tried such drug testing policies and have found that it costs a great deal while delivering only meager results. When Florida implemented testing, only 2.6% of enrollees tested positive. (For comparison, the overall rate of drug abuse among Wisconsin adults is 8.5%.) When Virginia proposed such a program, the state discovered that it would have cost an estimated \$1.5 million and saved only \$229,000. This experience reinforces our view that there are better ways to use our limited public funds to help people overcome drug addictions and prepare for jobs that will support themselves and their families.

Those who find themselves in need of public assistance, and those – whatever their economic and social situation – who suffer from addiction are our neighbors, friends, family members, and fellow worshippers. They all deserve our respect and our help to overcome the obstacles that deprive them of opportunities to lead more productive and fulfilling lives.

We agree that policies should help the needy without enabling dependency of those able to support themselves. But we should also avoid policies that require us to abandon those among us who cannot help themselves, or who need a little more time, patience and assistance to be able to support themselves and their families.

For all these reasons, we respectfully urge you to delete this unwise and unfair proposal from the budget bill.

Thank you for considering our views on this matter.

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