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9 Investigates: Welfare Drug Testing



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CENTRAL FLORIDA -- Just six weeks after Florida began drug testing welfare applicants, WFTV uncovered numbers, which show that the program is already costing Central Florida taxpayers more than it saves.

9 Investigates' reporter George Spencer found very few applicants are testing positive for drugs.

On July 1, Florida began requiring a clean drug test before giving cash assistance to needy families.

The Department of Central Florida's (DCF) region tested 40 applicants and only two tested positive for drugs, officials said. One of the tests is being appealed.

Governor Rick Scott said the program would save money. Critics said it already looks like a boondoggle.

"We have a diminishing amount of returns for our tax dollars. Do we want our governor throwing our precious tax dollars into a program that has already been proven not to work?" Derek Brett of the ACLU said.

DCF said it has been referring applicants to clinics where drug screenings cost between \$30 and \$35. The applicant pays for the test out of his or her own pocket and then the state reimburses him if they test comes back negative.

Therefore, the 38 applicants in the Central Florida area, who tested negative, were reimbursed at least \$30 each and cost taxpayers \$1,140.

Meanwhile, the state is saving less than \$240 a month by refusing benefits to those two applicants who tested positive.

9 Investigates first uncovered evidence in June that a similar program in Idaho also cost more than it saved.

However, the state insisted that the program is as much about principles as it is about money.

"We wanted to ensure that the individuals who are eligible for this benefit are using them for the true, intended purpose of this benefit," DCF spokeswoman Carrie Hoepfner said.

The cost to state taxpayers could rise even further if a lawsuit challenging the test is filed, as expected. The ACLU said it believes the drug tests are a blatant violation of 4th Amendment protections against unreasonable search and seizure.

The governor's office did not respond to WFTV's requests for comment on the new numbers.

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