

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Controlling the cost of Welfare

The Boston Globe wrote a million dollar story this winter, but the story was not about a lottery winner or inventor. The story featured a mother, her seventeen children and their children. The whole dynasty is being supported by the state and federal governments through various social programs at a cost estimated between \$750,000 and \$1 million per year. The story gave urgency to the feeling that many of us have that “something must be done to control the costs of welfare.”

A general overhaul of the entire system is required to change the patterns of dependency and hopelessness that are pervasive in public assistance programs. In addition to massive changes, however, I have proposed a single inexpensive addition to the public assistance application process. This innovation has been introduced in both Los Angeles and upstate New York where it has already proven its effectiveness in cutting costs without cutting benefits. It requires the recording of computerized images of fingerprints as a part of the welfare application process.

The law that I propose establishes procedures for a new public assistance applicant to have digitized images of both index fingers recorded in a computer system. Once a file is created for a particular fingerprint, any other application for the same fingerprint is denied (though the denial can be appealed).

The intent of the program is not to expose or prosecute fraud, but simply to prevent it. When the system was first tried in Los Angeles, the caseload dropped by substantially more than the expected 2%. A few applicants were rejected, but most of the savings came when cases simply disappeared. Budget dollars now go to their intended purpose of helping families in need.

Some welfare advocates object to the intrusion into clients’ privacy. They assert that the state should accept applications for assistance at face value, but the reality is that duplicate welfare applications are a known form of welfare fraud that can be virtually eliminated with finger photo identification.

The legislation is drafted to provide more protection for a welfare recipient than exists for the bus drivers, childcare workers or any other citizens who are routinely subjected to mandatory fingerprints. The law forbids the use of the identification system for any outside purpose, and there are criminal penalties for any such use. This is another use for the Russian proverb that President Reagan was so fond of quoting, “Trust, but verify.”

Los Angeles County has utilized the system for recipients of general relief for several years and realized a savings of \$5.4 million, according to the Associated Press. The county is presently expanding the program to include Aid to Families with Dependent Children. New York has engaged in a pilot program in two counties, and the government has achieved substantial savings.

Massachusetts lawmakers have spent the past few years analyzing every governmental expenditure for ways to cut costs, knowing that our cost-saving measures may reduce necessary government services. Many lawmakers have joined me as co-sponsors of this effort to reach the goal of cost savings without causing any harm to the legitimate participants in welfare programs. With the support of our colleagues we can help Massachusetts turn isolated pilot programs into a national trend.