

'Workfare' accord goes to vote



SALEM (AP) — Nearly three years after Oregon voters passed a "workfare" program, it has gone nowhere. But that could change if lawmakers buy a heavily revised version of the pilot program, which is aimed at replacing welfare with work.

On the day after the 1990 general election, Gov. Barbara Roberts declared Measure 7 "dead on arrival" even though it had passed with 58 percent of the vote.

However, Roberts and sponsors of the workfare proposal now have reached accord on a reworked version, which is on its way to the full House for a vote.

The measure in its original form would have suspended all welfare, food stamp and unemployment benefits in the six pilot counties where the program would have a trial run.

Employers volunteering to hire the former public assistance recipients would not have had to pay more than 90 percent of minimum wage. Money from the suspended government programs would be shifted into a fund to pay the wages.

Proponents say the plan is intended to get people off welfare and put them into job training that involves actual work for employers.

But Roberts and other Measure 7 opponents said it was too drastic in its effects on people dependent on government aid. And they argued that federal officials never would grant rule waivers needed to allow the project to go ahead.

Welfare, food stamps and unemployment are mostly federally financed, so states have to seek exceptions to rules if they want to make major changes in a program.

The new bill is a major overhaul of Measure 7 and addresses "fundamental deficits" in the voter-passed version, says Kevin Concannon, director of the state Department of Human Resources.

Among the flaws in the original measure, he said, was that it would have cut off some assistance as health insurance to people who would have ended up with fewer overall benefits even though

they went to work.

The revised measure continues Medicaid and child care payments for people who get jobs under the program.

They also would have to be paid at least the state minimum wage, now \$4.75 an hour.

"It's a more humane program and I think a better idea of what the voters wanted," Concannon said.

He said the state also plans to seek federal permission to allow it to pass along all child support it recovers for parents on welfare.

Federal regulations allow just \$50 a month of amounts recovered to go to parents. The rest offsets welfare aid and costs of the recovery program.

Roberts supports the new plan because it better recognizes needs of people who would go into the program, said Kerry Barnett, the governor's legal counsel.

"Measure 7 was punitive," Barnett said. "Under the original program, a mother faced losing welfare if she did not take a subminimum-wage job. It was giving her a choice between two impossible alternatives."

The effort that put the measure on the ballot by initiative petition was led by executives of Jeld-Wen, a Klamath Falls-based wood products company.

"We think the bill is maintaining the basic principles of Measure 7," said Bill Early, a senior vice president based at the company's Vancouver, Wash., plant.

"Our real excitement now is to see it implemented," he said. "We think this has the potential to change the whole approach to reforming welfare."

The revised plan still has detractors in the Legislature.

Some say business would fare too well under the bill, HB2459, by getting free help without paying anything.

"I do not oppose employer incentives to hire people but for the state to pay the full load is a question," said Rep. Dave McTeague, D-Milwaukie, who voted against the measure in a House committee.

Three charged in Diet Pepsi incident

PORTLAND (AP) — Three Oregon residents who claimed to have found syringes in Pepsi cans were charged Monday with making false statements.

According to court documents, two of those charged said their claims were made as jokes. The third person admitted he too was lying when he made the claim.

Cheri Bishop, 22, of Hillsboro; James Robison, 19, Portland; and John Waudby, 21, Portland, are to appear before U.S. Magistrate John Jelderks Tuesday. If convicted, they face a maximum penalty of five years in prison

and a \$250,000 fine. Court documents showed Bishop said she made the claim as a joke on her husband and that Waudby also said his claim was a joke. Robison also admitted to lying, court documents said.

More than 50 cases of alleged tampering with Pepsi or Diet Pepsi cans had been reported as of last week. As of Friday, there had been more than a dozen arrests or confessions of false reports.

Bishop said in an interview last Wednesday that she had noticed

two syringes in the bottom of a glass of Pepsi her husband had poured for her.

"It's really sad to think about the sick people in society nowadays," she said at the time.

U.S. Attorney Jack Wong said such false claims are no laughing matter.

"You're scaring the public. It's certainly disruptive to the society," he said. "There's a tremendous economic cost to Pepsi and to the federal government. We have to go out and investigate all of them because they could be potentially serious."

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