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OPINION

NEWS ITEM: CONSERVATIVES PROPOSE SUBJECTING THE UNEMPLOYED TO DRUG TESTING



An Attack on Unemployment Insurance

The hidden motives to drug testing the jobless

BY DAVID ELLIOT



It's all the rage in state legislatures and even in Congress. More than a dozen states are debating proposals to require jobless Americans who receive unemployment benefits to submit to mandatory drug testing.

The argument for forcing the unemployed to relieve themselves in a cup goes something like this: Tax dollars shouldn't support drug addicts, and neither federal nor state governments should be in the business of funding drug cartels.

Never mind that sober-minded think tanks, serious policy shops, and even the nation's leading newspapers have debunked the notion that unemployed workers are likely to be drug users, and that mandatory drug testing constitutes sound public policy.

It took Jon Stewart's Daily Show to expose the hypocrisy of drug-testing proponents. Stewart dispatched faux reporter Aasif Mandvi to Florida to interview Navy veteran Louis Lebron, an unemployed worker who is relying on his benefits to take care of his disabled mom while he studies to be an accountant.

"I refuse to take the drug test," Lebron solemnly tells Aasif. "This is unconstitutional. It

violates the Fourth Amendment. I served in the U.S. Navy. I took an oath to support and defend the Constitution. It's casting a cloud over a population of people with no factual evidence."

He's right.

Advocates for unemployed workers suspect that conservatives who would require unemployment recipients to submit to mandatory drug testing have a hidden motive:

First, undermine public support for unemployment insurance by associating recipients with drug users. Then, get the public to think about unemployment insurance as just a government handout. Finally, blame the unemployed for their predicament, thus creating a political environment that allows benefits to be slashed.

An example of this thinking comes from Florida Gov. Rick Scott, who told CNN, "The studies show that people on welfare are using drugs (at rates) much higher than the (general) population."

Wrong. Before a federal judge struck down Florida's drug testing program as unconstitutional, just two percent of unemployment recipients there failed a drug test. Much lower than the estimated 8-to-9 percent of the U.S. population that uses illegal drugs on a regular basis. In Indiana, 1,240 people were tested, and of those, just 13 people, or about 1 percent of the sample, tested positive.

Even if drug testing were to root out a significant sample of unemployment insurance recipi-

ents, and even if one could overlook the moral and constitutional implications, there's another problem: Cost.

Depending on which test is used, drug testing costs \$25 to \$75 per test. Indiana's drug testing program cost \$45,000 and involved 1,240 people, and yielded 13 people who tested positive, according to the National Law Employment Project. That's an average of \$3,500 for every positive test result, or more money than it would cost to extend federal unemployment insurance benefits for one person through 2012.

More broadly, an advisory board in Texas found it would cost that state \$30 million to implement a comprehensive testing program for jobless Texans, which is why a drug-testing proposal failed to pass even the rabidly conservative Texas House of Representatives.

Will lawmakers in Congress and the state legislatures come to their senses? Perhaps, but it might take some comic relief to help them do so.

Already, with tongues planted firmly in cheek, Democratic lawmakers in four states — Florida, Georgia, Ohio, and Tennessee — have proposed making Republican legislators pee in cups. And a bipartisan group of legislators in a fifth state, Indiana, actually passed a bill calling for random drug testing of their colleagues.

If some lawmakers tested positive, we could call it Legislating under the Influence. And that, we can all agree, is a waste of our tax dollars.

David Elliot is communications director for USAction.



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