**On Welfare? Don't Use The Money For Movies, Say Kansas Lawmakers**

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[Pam Fessler NPR.org](http://www.npr.org/people/2100470/pam-fessler)

Welfare recipients in Kansas may soon be barred from spending their benefits on activities like going to the movies or swimming, or from withdrawing more than $25 per day from bank machines.

If Gov. Sam Brownback signs the bill, it will become one of the strictest welfare laws in the country. It's one of a number of such measures popping up in states that say they're trying to reduce fraud and get people off the welfare rolls. But opponents say the laws are mean-spirited and hurt the poor.

Supporters of the Kansas measure, known as the Hope, Opportunity and Prosperity for Everyone Act, or HOPE Act, say they hope it leads to more welfare recipients getting work.

"That's our goal," Republican Kansas Sen. Michael O'Donnell said on the floor of the state Senate last week. "I think everyone in this room has the same feeling and same dedication to making sure that Kansans have high quality of life. And you don't have high quality of life if you don't have a job."

The measure includes work and job training requirements for those on welfare, known officially as Temporary Assistance For Needy Families, or TANF. But the bill also imposes new restrictions: a three-year lifetime limit on getting benefits and the $25-a-day limit on cash withdrawals from an ATM.

It also includes a long list of things recipients can't spend their benefits on, from casinos, cruises and strip joints to movies, jewelry and swimming.

Shannon Cotsoradis, president and CEO of the advocacy group Kansas Action for Children, says she thinks the bill "suggests that this is what families on cash assistance do with their dollars — and I think that's a far cry from the reality."

The average welfare recipient gets less that $300 per month in Kansas, and Cotsoradis says most families receiving those benefits are struggling to make ends meet, not planning a Caribbean cruise.

What bothers her even more, she says, is the three-year lifetime limit on benefits, because families will then be dropped from the rolls, even if they can't find work.

"And I think it's shortsighted, because what happens at end of the day is the children living in those families suffer," she says. "And we set the stage for another generation of poor adults — kids who haven't really had the benefit of having their basic needs met, as children."

Kansas isn't the only state considering new restrictions. On Monday, Maine Gov. Paul LePage proposed a welfare bill that among other things would prevent benefits from being spent out of state. A Missouri House committee is considering a measure to prohibit the withdrawal of any cash assistance from an ATM. Another lawmaker wants to ban the use of food stamps to buy fish, after one recipient boasted about eating lobster.

Mark Rank, a professor of social welfare at Washington University in St. Louis, calls some of the restrictions ludicrous.

"What's going on is basically, people are scoring political points by going after the poor and welfare recipients," he says.

Rank says it's part of a long tradition, perhaps made most famous by President Ronald Reagan, who repeatedly talked about a woman who defrauded the government extensively — the so-called welfare queen.

Ranks says that's an "old stereotype that people who are poor are basically at fault, people who are using welfare are basically abusing the system," when welfare fraud is relatively limited.

He also questions whether the prohibition against spending money on items such as movies is enforceable, because it will be difficult to know whether the individual is using their welfare benefits, or some other cash.

Even so, fraud is worth going after, says Kansas Rep. Travis Couture-Lovelady, especially if the money can be better spent on those who need it. The purpose of the new Kansas law, he says, is to make clear that benefits are not for entertainment but for basic necessities like food, rent and utilities.

"It's not to look down on those folks in any way at all," he says. "It was to try and help lift them up, and the work programs have been very successful. I don't see it as being harsh on the folks that really need the assistance, 'cause they're not using it in these inappropriate manners anyways."

And he thinks the three-year lifetime limit on benefits is reasonable. Some lawmakers, he says, wanted to cut it down to two. He says the average time a Kansan spends on welfare now is 18 months.