

Welfare Program Requiring Parents to Be Fingerprinted

SACRAMENTO, March 30 (AP) — Under a program approved today, Los Angeles County will become the first place in the nation where parents applying for welfare for their children will have to submit to fingerprint checks.

State officials said the fingerprinting of recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children would be expanded statewide if the Los Angeles program succeeded in combatting welfare fraud.

"You can use a phony Social Security card or a phony name, but nobody can use a phony fingerprint," Gov. Pete Wilson said in a statement. "We've put our finger on the key to eliminating duplicate welfare checks in California."

Wilson Administration officials said the program could save \$4.2 million in its first year in Los Angeles, and as much as \$750 million if it was implemented statewide.

Some counties, including Los Angeles, already fingerprint applicants for general assistance, typically single adults. In the first six months after Los Angeles County began those checks in 1991, the county reported cutting its costs by \$5.4 million, or more than half. More than 3,000 people lost their aid for suspected fraud, and more than 200 applicants were denied assistance because they refused to submit their fingerprints.

But advocates for the poor questioned whether the savings would be worth the costs of running the new program, and they criticized the Administration for singling out low-income families who have been hit hardest by the recession.

"If they spent just an iota of the time looking at white-collar crime, they would bring in a whole lot more money than they would bring in going after welfare fraud," said Patricia Whitney-Wise of the California Council of Churches. "Once again, they're blaming the victims rather than the cause of the problem."

Kevin Aslanian, executive director of the Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations, said: "This is just the Governor's consistent pattern of harassing poor women who are trying to raise a family. It implies that welfare recipients are cheating. That's not true. I challenge anybody to raise a family of three on \$600 a month."

More than 850,000 people in Los Angeles County receive A.F.D.C. payments, most of them single mothers and their children.

Under the fingerprint program, A.F.D.C. applicants will have their fingerprints scanned electronically. A computer will then compare the prints to those of people already receiving benefits.

Applicants who refuse to be fingerprinted will be denied aid.

Jennifer Nelson, a spokeswoman for Governor Wilson's Health and Welfare Agency said the fingerprints would not be shared with any other government agencies.

The Federal Government granted California a waiver last September to fingerprint A.F.D.C. applicants, but the state Legislature never approved the program. Ms. Nelson said the Administration had since determined it could authorize the Los Angeles project without a change in state law.

State estimates for welfare fraud in California range from 4 percent to 64 percent of those receiving benefits. Welfare rights advocates said only a small percent were welfare cheats.

"Is it worth spending all that money to catch a few people when that money could have gone into a nutrition program for kids?" Ms. Whitney-Wise asked.