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**LD 1615: An Act to Facilitate Substance Abuse Treatment for Certain Applicants
for and Recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Benefits**

Senator Brakey, Representative Hymanson, esteemed colleagues on the Health and Human Service Committee, I'm Representative Deb Sanderson and today I present for your consideration, a Governors bill, LD 1615 ~ An Act to Facilitate Substance Abuse Treatment for Certain Applicants for and Recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Benefits.

On this committee, we have had multiple discussions on substance abuse treatment and recovery. We also speak about education to help our youth and others avoid becoming addicted to illicit substances in the first place. Another topic we've had in-depth discussions about are the opioid prescribing habits of our physicians and we've passed legislation which will enforce more responsible prescribing habits to help alleviate addiction to legally prescribed opiates and, with time, lower the dosages of long term opiate dependent individuals for pain management. While there are several reasons an individual may develop an addiction to illegal or controlled substances there is no way that we can, from a policy perspective, legislate our way to a world where there are no substance use disorders. However, for those who are caught in the terrible net of addiction, one of the best ways to help is to first identify who they are then, get them into treatment.

LD 1615 seeks to institute a screening tool, the SASSI test, that will be given to all applicants and current recipients of TANF assistance benefits. Returning members of this committee will remember that this assessment tool was proposed in the 126th legislature however, the process in this proposal is slightly different.

Like the last proposal, the screening tool asks questions that can determine an applicant's likelihood of a current substance use disorder. If the SASSI assessment score indicates there is no likelihood the applicant or recipient is at risk, they continue through the application/approval process to receive TANF assistance. However, if the SASSI assessment test indicates there is a likelihood, the applicant/recipient will be offered the opportunity to immediately enter a substance abuse treatment program identified and approved by the department; the cost of which shall be covered with available TANF program funds. At the same time, the application for TANF assistance will continue to be processed in order to determine eligibility without delay. If an applicant/recipient who receives a score on the SASSI assessment test indicating a likelihood of substance abuse declines treatment, the application will be denied however, they shall be offered a fair hearing in which to appeal the denial and shall submit to a drug test.

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If the drug test confirms the presence of an illegal drug or controlled substance that has not been prescribed by a physician or primary caregiver, the applicant may still avoid a final denial of TANF assistance benefits by enrolling in a substance abuse treatment program.

The intent of this legislation is not to be punitive and deny benefits to individuals in need of help. Instead, it gives the department the authority to use a tool to assess and identify who is, and who isn't at risk for substance abuse and enroll those at risk in treatment while still having the opportunity to be approved for, and receive, TANF benefits to help support their families. By granting the department authority to administer the SASSI assessment test, we will aid the department in their quest to identify individuals caught in the net of addiction and get them into much needed treatment.

My closing thought regarding implementing the SASSI assessment tool and the relationship to those who are applying for TANF benefits is this: TANF is Temporary Assistance for Needy Families...Families being the key word in the title of this program. There are children in these homes; children who need their moms and dads to be healthy. Children who should not have to fear that mom or dad doesn't feel well enough to cook them supper, attend their school functions or worse, can't be woken up.

If left un-identified, a parent may continue using illicit substances causing danger and further hardship for their kids. I sincerely believe that parents suffering from addiction do not intentionally mean to put their children in harm's way however, the call of addiction is a siren that can't be ignored, blocking out all thoughts of anything except the next fix. The sooner we can identify them and bring them into treatment, the better chance there is for the children to remain safe and happy in their home.

Thank you for your consideration and I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Representative Deb Sanderson