



Legislative Post Audit Performance Audit Report Highlights

State Benefit Programs: Identifying Disincentives for Marriage

Report Highlights

September, 2011 • R-11-013

Audit Concern

Recently, SRS officials have expressed interest in developing programs to promote marriage. Additionally, Legislators have expressed concerns that some State benefit programs might financially discourage some clients who are considering marriage.

Other Relevant Facts for Question 1

Most benefit programs use a variety of criteria to determine eligibility, including household size, income, and composition. However, programs vary in how they apply these criteria:

- Some programs don't distinguish between the income of married and cohabitating couples. For these programs, the income of everyone living in the home is counted.
- Other programs consider two unmarried people living together to be two different households with separate income.

Literature acknowledges that programs with income-based eligibility have built in disincentives. In general, when a household has two or more people with income, that household is less likely to be eligible for the program. However, there's little information as to whether this actually causes people to avoid getting married.

AUDIT QUESTION 1: *To what extent do Kansas benefit programs create a financial disincentive for marriage?*

AUDIT ANSWERS and KEY FINDINGS:

- *Most of the programs we reviewed have eligibility criteria that could discourage marriage in some situations, or have no effect in others. We reviewed 36 benefit programs in five agencies and found:*
 - *Two programs for veterans have eligibility criteria that could discourage marriage in any situation.*
 - *29 programs have eligibility criteria that could discourage marriage in some situations, but have no effect in others. Appendix B and C in the full report show a detailed review of these programs and how the results can vary depending on the clients' situations.*
 - *Five programs do not have eligibility criteria that would discourage marriage in any situation. Four of these programs are administered by the Department on Aging, and don't use income as a criteria for eligibility. A fifth program (for veterans) could actually encourage marriage.*
- *Very few program staff we surveyed told us program eligibility criteria have a significant effect on clients' decision to marry.*
 - *Staff responses were evenly split about whether eligibility rules affect clients' decisions to marry— 14 said yes, and 14 said no.*
 - *However, of the 14 staff who said eligibility rules do influence a client's decision to marry, only four said the influence was strong.*
- *The vast majority of clients we spoke with told us eligibility criteria have little effect on their decision to marry.*
 - *21 of 23 clients told us the eligibility rules have not affected their marital decisions*
 - *19 of 23 clients told us they were aware that marriage could negatively affect their benefits, but also said that wouldn't affect their decision to get married.*
- *Our staff and client survey results cannot be projected statewide because the people interviewed were not randomly chosen.*

Agencies' Response: *We sent the draft report to all five agencies. Only SRS expressed concerns about any of the report's findings. SRS' concerns were that we interviewed too few staff and clients. Given the objectives of this audit and the types of the answers we received, we think the number of staff and clients interviewed were appropriate to provide insight about how program eligibility criteria might affect clients' decisions about marriage. However, as noted in the report, the results of both sets of interviews cannot be projected.*

HOW DO I GET AN AUDIT APPROVED?

By law, individual legislators, legislative committees, or the Governor may request an audit, but any audit work conducted by the Division must be approved by the Legislative Post Audit Committee, a 10-member committee that oversees the Division's work. Any legislator who would like to request an audit should contact the Division directly at (785) 296-3792.

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