

STATE NEWS WEEKLY SUMMARY CONTINUED



sions — Limiting cash assistance to five years.

“At the present time,” Miller explained, “there is no national tracking system for welfare recipients. There’s no real way to share up-to-date information across state lines. One thing that’s common among some welfare recipients is that they are a mobile population, so I don’t see how the federal government plans to enforce that provision.”

Miller said he hopes Oklahoma can answer some of its questions about the reform plan before the end of the year. To do that, Miller said, he is calling up an advisory group of 85 people who met last year and produced “Oklahoma Works Together: Block Grant Project Resource Document.”

—SHAWN ASHLEY
10/07/96

CARDS REPLACE FOOD STAMPS IN MARCH

■(OKLAHOMA CITY) Paper food stamps will be replaced with plastic debit cards in Oklahoma, next year, State Rep. Bill Case, R-Midwest City, said Friday. In addition, recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) will be able to use their cards to get cash benefits at automatic bank-teller machines rather than having to wait for checks in the mail, Dee Fones, Department of Human Services EBT project manager, added.

Called the Electronics Benefits Transfer (EBT), the program will be introduced first in Oklahoma County in March 1997, and phased in statewide by the end of the year Case said.

With the new program, food-stamp recipients can make food purchases with a plastic, magnetic-stripe “swipe” card similar to an ATM or credit card, instead of paper coupons, Case said. Purchases made with the card will be counted against a user’s food-stamp account electronically.

After its introduction in Oklahoma County next March, the EBT will be implemented in Canadian, Cleveland, Logan and Pottawatomie counties next May. Tulsa and surrounding counties will begin the services in June and south-central counties will start using the cards in July. The rest of Oklahoma will be phased in through the following months until the whole state is using the program by November 1997.

Half of the \$30 million cost of the seven-year EBT contract will be paid by the fed-

eral government. Contractor Lockheed Martin is responsible for providing and maintaining EBT hardware in more than 3,000 retail grocery and convenience stores in Oklahoma and for training clients to use the cards Fones said.

Despite the initial outlay, the system is expected to cut costs and curb fraud in several ways Case said. Fones added that “safeguards are built into the system.”

For example, in the past, food stamps were a hot black-market item. Recipients could sell their food stamps and claim they were lost or stolen to receive a new supply. With the card, a new personal identification number (pin) will be issued if the card is replaced, and the old card will be disabled.

More than 333,000 Oklahomans on public welfare rolls will be affected by the debit card system Fones added.

—HOUSE MEDIA
10/07/96

MENTAL ILLNESS INSURANCE PARITY TASK FORCE EXAMINES OTHER STATES

■(GIT) Other states’ laws related to mental illness insurance parity were the focus Thursday of the Task Force on Mental Illness Insurance Coverage.

The task force, chaired by Sen. Angela Monson, D-Tulsa, briefly examined four states’ laws designed to promote parity of coverage between medical/surgical insurance and mental illness insurance. The goal of the task force is to make legislative recommendations designed to bring mental illness insurance coverage on par with other forms of insurance coverage, particularly medical and surgical insurance coverage.

House staffer Claudia Durrell told the panel that the states — Maine, Maryland, New Hampshire and Minnesota — vary in their approaches to the definition of mental illness and the amount of parity required by their laws.

Maine and New Hampshire, Durrell explained, limit their required coverage to only “biologically based mental illnesses,” while Maryland and Minnesota also have provisions related to emotional disorders and substance abuse or chemical dependency.

The costs of the required coverage also varies from state-to-state, the House staffer noted.

In addition, a mental illness parity provision recently enacted by Congress was

addressed. That provision, part of HR3666, prohibits group health insurance plans that already have mental illness components from having financial differentials between that coverage and the other forms of coverage, particularly medical and surgical, included in the plan.

Monson said it is her hope that the next meeting, which will include testimony from representatives of the business community, the psychiatric community and the insurance industry, will help lay the groundwork for the panel’s legislative recommendations. That meeting will be held on the morning of Oct. 31 at a site to be announced.

Two additional meetings are also planned — Nov. 14 and Dec. 16. During the November meeting, Monson said she will ask the panel to put together its final recommendations for legislative action. The Dec. 16 meeting will be dedicated to completing that effort and preparing the recommendations for submission to the legislature by the panel’s legislatively-imposed Jan. 2 deadline.

—SHAWN ASHLEY
10/10/96

ADOPTION REFORM COMMITTEE SETS LEGISLATIVE GOALS

■(GIT) In their 12th meeting Thursday, the Adoption Law Reform Committee, appointed by the legislature in 1995, set time constraints for recommendations to the 46th legislature and discussed the impact of public hearings on member opinions.

Public hearings were held in Oklahoma City and Tulsa to enable committee members to hear suggestions from adoptees, adoptive parents and others involved with the adoption process.

The overwhelming opinion expressed at both meetings, Rep. Russ Roach, D-Tulsa said, is adopted adults want access to adoption records held by the state. In some cases, adoption records of many years ago are incomplete, preventing adopted people from gaining knowledge of their own medical and/or social history. In other cases, adopted adults want to make contact with their birth parents.

“An adoptee who does the research on his own and makes contact anyway has no assurance he’ll get any emotional satisfaction from the contact,” Roach said. Testimony of this nature indicated a qualified,

Continued on next page