

DRUG TESTING VICTIMIZES POOR, CRITICS SAY

Provincial government is trying to help people with real drug problems get their lives together, MPP argues

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

Like welfare, drug testing of welfare recipients is another example of the government helping people turn their lives around, Oak Ridges MPP Frank Klees says.

But don't tell that to critics, who complain the system to be introduced next year, is further proof the Tories beat up the poor.

"The purpose of that program, the goal, is to remove barriers to employment and to help these people who are addicted deal with addiction and get back into mainstream society," Klees said yesterday.

"It's not a matter of singling these people out and punishing them. It's to identify people with problems and help them with drug addiction programs, to get them the appropriate level of treatment."

It's difficult to pinpoint exactly how the program will work or how much it will cost, Klees said, because the government is still consulting with people with addictions, counsellors who treat them, taxpayers who pay for social service benefits, legal experts,

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municipal officials and other jurisdictions in Canada and abroad.

He said testing will not be done randomly on welfare recipients. Instead, welfare case workers who suspect clients of having a drug problem will notify the government so testing can be carried out.

Klees stressed the province won't turn its back on drug addicts caught by the testing.

They will be placed in treatment programs and will continue to collect benefits.

"We're not going to give up on anybody," Klees said.

But those who refuse the mandatory testing or turn down "opportunities" for treatment will see their welfare cheques cut off.

Their dependents — such as children and spouses — will continue to receive their portion of benefits.

Klees said the government has an obligation to help drug addicts on welfare begin new lives through testing and follow-up treatment programs.

He compared the Tories to employers who have a responsibility to ensure their workers are drug free.

"The whole purpose of this program is to help people. The whole purpose is to make them become productive citizens," Klees said.

"We know it (addiction) is complicated. We know there are no simple solutions. We also know it's going to cost the government some money to help these people. But we know it's worth the investment."

But the Tories face stiff resistance to the drug testing plan — from opposition parties and people who work with the poor on a daily basis.

Liberal Social Services critic Michael Gravelle, Transitional and Supportive Housing Services of York Region executive director Monica Auerbach and Jane Nielsen, family services director with Newmarket's Salvation Army, all condemn forcing welfare recipients to participate in drug testing.

Pointing out one of the first steps the Tories took after winning office in 1995 was to cut welfare payments by 21.6 per cent, Gravelle said numerous studies have indicated that people receiving social service benefits are no more likely to be taking drugs than any other segment of society.

To make a point, Gravelle's boss, Liberal leader Dalton McGuinty, earlier this month introduced a bill called the What's Good for the Goose is Good for the Gander Act.

McGuinty suggested MPPs, who are paid through the public purse, should also submit to drug testing.

While McGuinty made his statement tongue in cheek, Gravelle said, the stunt brought attention to Premier Mike Harris' "spiteful" treatment of the poor.

"The drug testing is extraordinarily offensive," Gravelle said.

"It's a horrific way of demonizing a group in our society that can't fight back."

"They have no more chance of having a drug problem than any other segment in our society, including MPPs. I think people are generally horrified by this government's treatment of the poor."

Klees disagrees. While he maintained he would have no objection to submitting to a drug test, he said McGuinty's legislation indicates the Liberals are more interested in headline-grabbing stunts than helping the poor turn their lives around.

But Auerbach and Nielsen said the Tories are doing nothing to help the poor.

Auerbach argued cutting a breadwinner off welfare for one positive drug test will create greater child poverty.

"I don't think it's about helping people at all. It's about penalizing people," she said.

"I think it's one more thing of beating up on the poor and victimizing people who are already down."

Meanwhile, Nielsen said one positive drug test for something like marijuana doesn't necessarily mean someone is a hard-core junkie.

To cut them off benefits for refusing treatment is unjust. Even murderers get second chances in life, she said.

"Harris, I don't know what his problem is where poor people are concerned," she said.

"I don't think (drug testing) will ever fly. I think it's absolute insanity to test the poor. But if the government decides to do that, they better put in programs to address their addictions."

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

It's a controversial subject and we'd like to know what you think about drug testing for welfare recipients.

Does Frank Klees' argument that the province is helping people with problems get their lives back on track by identifying them and getting them appropriate support make sense to you?

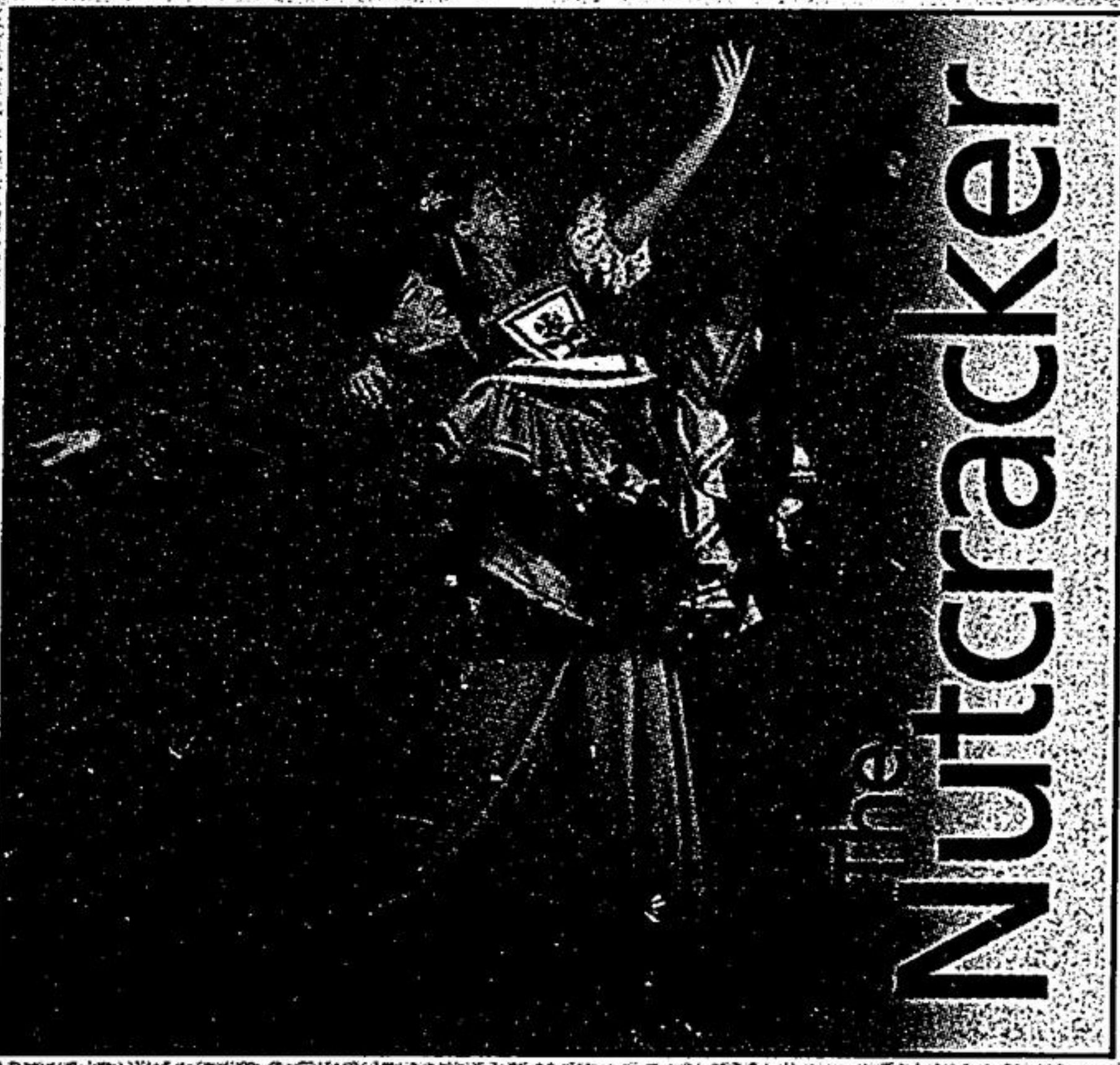
Or is this program of drug testing simply an attack on the poor, victimizing those people who are least able to defend themselves?

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