



Ohio Gov. John Kasich says state won't pursue old overpayments to welfare recipients

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By **Reginald Fields, The Plain Dealer**

COLUMBUS, Ohio - Gov. John Kasich is reversing a **policy to track down welfare recipients who more than a decade ago received checks overpaying them** for state assistance.

"If we can determine you committed fraud we're going back 100 years to get the money back for the taxpayers," the Republican said Monday.

But in other cases, the state will restore its previous policy of going back only 10 years, Kasich said, "because that is more practical."

Kasich is also considering taking it a step further by forgiving all overpayments to welfare recipients -- including those that occurred within the last 10 years -- if it is proven that the mistake was due to an error by a state agency or employee.

"When the government overpays somebody, for the government to then go back and punish somebody they overpaid, that is the ultimate bureaucratic blunder and I wouldn't favor that," Kasich said. "Isn't it typical of the government that they make the mistake and they blame you for it?"

The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland last week was critical of Kasich's administration for going after poor and elderly people for overpayments more than 25 years old. On Monday, the society's deputy director, Dave Dawson, said he was pleased with the governor's position.

"To the extent that the governor is considering not punishing people who were not at fault in causing the



Jay LaPrete, Associated Press

Gov. John Kasich: Reversing a policy to track down welfare recipients who more than a decade ago received checks overpaying them for state assistance.

overpayment, we would agree with that and applaud that position," Dawson said.

The trick now, however, is trying to determine how much money overpaid to welfare recipients within the last 10 years was due to state clerical errors and what was due to individuals failing to report their correct income and gaming the system.

"Clearly, some of this is on the part of the state; I can't say it is all on the part of the state," Dawson said. "But there is a substantial number caused by the state not following up and making the adjustments based on the information the individuals are giving them."

How the state will handle those cases in which overpayment is determined to be due to state error is "yet to be determined," said Kasich spokesman Rob Nichols. But complete forgiveness is an option.

There is a decent amount of cash at stake. According to the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, over the past 10 years there are about 12,000 instances where the state has determined it overpaid welfare recipients a total of about \$13 million.

For the moment, Ohio is reverting back to a 10-year claw-back rule for recovering overpayments, which was commonplace in Ohio until December 2010 when it was changed under outgoing Democratic Gov. Ted Strickland.

This pertains to cash assistance only. Rules for food stamps fall under different guidelines.

Collection notices for cash overpayments to welfare recipients are generated by state computers once a year. That one time came in early November when nearly 22,000 notices, some involving cases nearly three decades old, were sent to Ohioans.

Kasich said he was not aware of the change until his administration began getting calls from angry Ohioans and advocacy groups over the past couple of weeks questioning why the state was going after such old cases.

The governor says he wishes leaders at ODJFS had noticed and addressed the issue more quickly.

"I'm very unhappy we didn't get ahead of this," Kasich said.

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