

Assembly approves GOP welfare overhaul package

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The Assembly signed off on a package of special session welfare bills to set new requirements for various government assistance programs including food stamps.

Dems voted against each of the 10 bills, authored by Speaker Robin Vos and Sen. Chris Kapenga, although they were largely silent on the floor as the legislation cleared the chamber in around three hours.

All but two of the bills passed on 62-35 party-line votes. Those are Special Session Assembly Bill 9, which would create a savings account program for Medicaid; and SSAB 10, which would add photo IDs to food stamp cards. Both passed on 61-36 votes.

Rep. Jesse Rodriguez, R-Oak Creek, joined the Dems in opposing SSAB 9, while Rep. Adam Neylon, R-Pewaukee, crossed party lines to vote against SSAB 10.

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The package also features a bill that would up the work requirement for FoodShare; another that would require child support compliance to be eligible for Medicaid; and a third that would add photo IDs to food stamp cards in an effort to combat fraud.

Vos, R-Rochester, at one point attempted to goad Dems into speaking on the bills, saying they weren't weighing in because "they're afraid of the voters because they know how incredibly popular these bills are." He was unsuccessful.

At the beginning of the special session, Dem Rep. Lisa Subeck decried the GOP effort, saying it amounts to nothing more than an election-year ploy and only seeks to throw hardworking families "under the campaign bus."

“(Republicans) think going after the neediest people in our communities is the best way to fire up their base in an election year,” she said. Subeck was one of just three Dems who spoke on the Assembly floor about the bills.

She also said lawmakers should instead be investing millions of dollars the package would cost into increasing access to child care, transportation, education and job training opportunities and raising wages.

Initial combined cost estimates of the bills from the Department of Health Services and Department of Children and Families showed the legislation would collectively cost more than \$90 million annually — excluding one-time start-up costs. But an updated overall figure isn’t yet available following the adoption of a series of amendments with the bills.

Meanwhile, Vos said the legislation would help further encourage those on government assistance to find work, a move that he said is necessary given the state’s 3 percent unemployment rate.

Speaking on the floor before the chamber began voting on each of the bills, Vos encouraged Dems to cross party lines and support the package.

“Welfare reform in the past has been bipartisan,” he said. “I always believed wanting people off of government benefits and be able to support themselves isn’t a partisan issue.”

The package includes:

*SSAB 1, which would up the work requirement for FoodShare to 30 hours from the current requirement of 20 hours.

*SSAB 2, which would require expand work requirements for food stamps that now apply only to able-bodied adults to those have school-aged dependents.

*SSAB 3, which would create asset limits for food stamps, W-2 or Wisconsin Shares.

*SSAB 4, which would add drug screening to the application process for those seeking public housing.

*SSAB 5, which would create a two-year pilot program to make monthly payments to those who received the Earned Income Tax Credit rather than waiting until after

they've filed their tax returns to send them a lump sum.

*SSAB 6, which would require DHS and DCF to create performance-based payment systems for W-2 and food stamps vendors.

*SSAB 7, which would allow DOA to contract with a private vendor to create a "pay for success trust fund." Those with a proposal to address an issue with social, employment or correctional services provided to individuals could bring it to the state and then negotiate an incentive based on the expected budget savings. That money would be set aside and the state would only pay the vendor if the goal was achieved.

*SSAB 8, which would cut off from Medicaid those able-bodied adults who refuse to cooperate with a paternity test or comply with a child support order.

*SSAB 9, which would create a savings account program for Medicaid. It cleared the chamber on a 61-36 vote, with Rep. Jesse Rodriguez, R-Oak Creek, joining the Dems in opposing it.

*SSAB 10, which would add photo IDs to food stamp cards.

The bills now head to the Senate.