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Collection of Welfare Debt Eases in California

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By VAUHINI VARA

California is ending a practice of seeking money from people whose parents were accidentally paid too much in welfare benefits years ago, after a lawsuit brought attention to the issue.

The California Department of Social Services on Friday issued a letter directing counties to "immediately terminate all collection actions" against adults or emancipated minors whose parents are indebted to the state.

By state law, California can target a welfare recipient's family to return overpayments when it is unable to get the recipient to repay the debt. Counties had been pursuing offspring of welfare recipients using methods such as intercepting their tax refunds and reducing their own welfare grants.

The decision to end the practice came after a 19-year-old and a 14-year-old sued the state in November for forcing them to repay their mothers' welfare debts. "I never knew this problem existed until the state started coming after me," said the 19-year-old, Jamie Hartley, a community-college student.

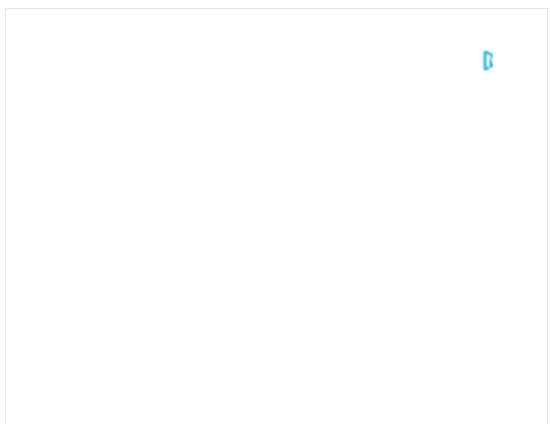
The suit got the attention of Darrell Steinberg, the Democratic leader of the state senate, who asked Gov. Jerry Brown to stop the practice. Mr. Brown's spokesman didn't respond to a request for comment. Mr. Steinberg called Friday's decision "a significant victory." "The social-services department halted the collection effort to "allow young adults to move forward toward their independence and provide an opportunity to work towards self-sufficiency," said Michael Weston, a spokesman.

Mr. Weston said the state hasn't determined how many people or how much money will be affected. Antonette Dozier, an attorney for Ms. Hartley, estimated the state was pursuing "a few thousand" people.

The state's decision is "a great step forward, but there's more work to be done," Ms. Dozier said.

In particular, the state may still target children who are minors no longer living with the adult who owes the debt, such as the 14-year-old who filed suit with Ms. Hartley and lives with her great-grandfather. Clarence Ayers receives \$334 a month in state aid to support his great-granddaughter, Irene, and Fresno County has threatened to cut the grant to repay almost \$3,000 mistakenly paid to Irene's mother.

With respect to such cases, Mr. Steinberg says he hoped to address that issue with




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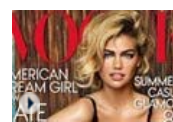
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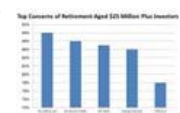
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