

## TANF is a Lifeline for Parents in Low-Wage Jobs and Those Facing Job Barriers

### Time Limits and Sanctions Do Not Improve Employment Outcomes

In 2025, DC adopted changes that will sharply reduce TANF benefits for families with children – a 60-month limit for receiving full benefits and increased financial sanctions when parents don't meet work preparation requirements, regardless of a family's circumstances.

These cuts stem from the notion that many parents who could be working are not. **Yet the reality is far different.** As a result, time limits and sanctions do not improve job outcomes – instead, they increase child poverty in families struggling to get by.

#### Most TANF Recipients Work, But in Low Wage, Unstable Jobs:

- ▶ Between 74% and 91% of TANF recipients **worked over a 5-year period** in studies done in communities across the U.S.<sup>1</sup>
- ▶ The majority of TANF recipients work in **low-paying sectors with high turnover rates**. TANF recipients who are employed typically earn well below the poverty line – less than \$26,650 for a family of three.<sup>2</sup>

#### Many TANF Parents Face Barriers to Work, Especially in a Weak Economy

- ▶ Residents with low incomes often live **far from job opportunities**. In DC, for example, Ward 8 residents have the longest commutes.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ Parents who receive TANF have much higher rates of **physical and mental health problems** than other adults, compounding their difficulty obtaining gainful employment.<sup>4</sup>
- ▶ Black DC residents, who make up the majority of TANF recipients in DC, are disproportionately employed in low-paying jobs, reflecting a long history **systemic racism**, particularly educational and occupational discrimination.
- ▶ TANF supports families through **economic downturns**, which have long-lasting effects on people's ability to find a job. This is especially relevant as DC's economy is expected to fall into recession in 2026.

## Time Limit Sanctions Do Not Address Barriers or Lead to Better Employment Outcomes

- ▶ Less than half of TANF recipients had **stable work** over five years, according to a review of multiple studies, and work rates were only modestly higher than among participants not subject to work requirements.<sup>5</sup>
- ▶ Parents cut off from TANF due to time limits and sanctions are **less likely to work** than those who leave on their own. The majority of parents cut off due to sanctions failed to find work according to several studies.<sup>6</sup>
- ▶ Time limits and sanctions **increase deep poverty**. One review found that deep poverty rates rose in more than half of reviewed programs with work requirements and didn't fall significantly in any of the surveyed programs.<sup>7</sup>

## DC is Cutting TANF Benefits without Improving Services

- ▶ DC's TANF time limits and sanctions were not coupled with additional **employment support**, leaving TANF parents stuck in a cycle of low-wage and unstable employment.
- ▶ DC eliminated its **college access** program in 2024. The PATHS program helped TANF recipients attend the University of the District of Columbia.
- ▶ DC's **benefits cliff** makes it hard to transition to work. Parents start seeing a drop in TANF benefits after earning just \$160 per month. Every \$3 of earnings above that leads to a \$1 cut in benefits – equivalent to a 33% tax rate.

**DC's new TANF approach is wrong-headed and will increase child poverty without improving job outcomes for parents.**

Rather than instituting benefit cuts predicated on time limits and work sanctions, the District should strengthen TANF as a safety net for parents in low-wage, high-turnover industries, and strengthen approaches that help parents prepare for living wage jobs.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> LaDonna Pavetti, [“Work Requirements Don’t Reduce Poverty, Evidence Shows,”](#) Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, June 7, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Ali Safawi and LaDonna Pavetti, [“Most Parents Leaving TANF Work, But in Low-Paying, Unstable jobs, Recent Studies Find,”](#) Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, November 19, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Canaan Merchant, [“Commutes take longer for District residents east of the Anacostia River,”](#) Greater Greater Washington, February 16, 2017

<sup>4</sup> Pavetti, op cit.

<sup>5</sup> Pavetti, op cit.

<sup>6</sup> ibid.

<sup>7</sup> LaDonna Pavetti and Ali Zane, [“TANF Cash Assistance Helps Families, But Program Is Not the Success Some Claim,”](#) Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, August 2, 2021.