Protect, Strengthen, Transform: A TANF Agenda for DC's Next Executive Administration

Policy Recommendations to Sustain and Improve Cash-Based Assistance & Build Supportive Pathways to Upward Mobility in the District

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TANF is Still a Lifeline

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Executive Summary

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is a lifeline for DC's most economically vulnerable families, providing flexible cash assistance to more than 16,000 households with children experiencing poverty. By helping families cover essential expenses like rent, utilities, and school supplies, TANF can enable parents to meet their families' immediate needs and avoid deeper financial hardship in an increasingly unaffordable District.

Protecting this lifeline is critical, but it is not enough to merely preserve the program as it exists today. Despite minimal progress over the past decade, DC's TANF program falls short of helping families achieve economic stability, let alone build a path toward upward mobility. Benefits remain too low to fully sustain families, employment services struggle to connect parents with good jobs, and continuing problems with agency operations and technology undermine enrollees' access to the assistance they need.

The next mayor of the District of Columbia has an opportunity to make TANF a stronger foundation for financial stability by ensuring benefits meet families' needs and that services help parents build pathways to lasting economic security. It is essential to reverse the harmful cuts proposed by the previous administration, but this is only a first step. Families in the District deserve a more comprehensive and ambitious agenda that addresses long-standing shortcomings with the TANF program and advances bold reforms.

The TANF is Still a Lifeline Coalition calls on the next mayor of the District of Columbia to advance the following priorities during their tenure:

- Restore funding for TANF's cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) and reverse increased sanctions for not meeting work readiness requirements and the reinstatement of time limits for families receiving TANF for 60 months or more.
- Address existing implementation barriers that make it harder for families to apply for and maintain TANF benefits.
- Explore programmatic reforms that strengthen TANF cash assistance and better support families' economic security.
- Assess the feasibility of shifting TANF funds from assistance to non-assistance spending, freeing up local dollars to reinvest in cash assistance without federal restrictions.
- Strengthen workforce development to create meaningful pathways to economic mobility for TANF families.

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Background and Current Landscape

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is the District's only cash-based assistance program. It serves as a vital lifeline for families with little or no income, helping to pay for rent, utilities, diapers, clothes, transportation, and other essentials. Having available cash provides power, flexibility, and greater stability, especially during uncertain economic times.

In 1996, TANF replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), shifting AFDC's open-ended funding structure to a fixed federal block grant that has remained unchanged since 1996, with no adjustments for inflation or changes in need.[1] Under TANF, federal funds are supplemented by required contributions from states known as Maintenance of Effort (MOE) funds. States have flexibility in how they choose to spend the federal block grant—on either assistance or non-assistance activities. If a state or jurisdiction, like the District of Columbia, has chosen to spend its block grant on direct assistance, it is subject to stricter federal requirements, including work participation rules and a 60-month lifetime limit on benefits.[2]

DC Invests Local Dollars to Protect TANF Families From Punitive Federal Requirements

When DC designed its TANF program in the late 90s, it purposefully set aside local dollars (outside of the required MOE funds) to ensure families who exceeded the 60-month lifetime limit could stay on TANF for as long as they needed.

In 2013, Mayor Gray proposed ending DC's use of local dollars to continue providing assistance beyond the federal five-year limit. When Mayor Bowser took office, she paused implementation and spent two years assessing the policies through an extensive working group process led by the Department of Human Services (DHS). The 2016 working group recommended maintaining the District's ongoing use of local dollars to eliminate time limits and minimize sanctions.[3] The working group cited extensive research that work requirements and time limits fail to improve outcomes for families.[4]

As a result, Mayor Bowser reversed the proposed 2013 policy, and DC continued to leverage the federal block grant, MOE funds, and local dollars to sustain the TANF and provide flexibilities to families struggling to meet work requirements and requiring more than 60 months of cash assistance. A few years earlier, DC also began adjusting TANF benefit levels that had been frozen for decades, helping families maintain their purchasing power as the cost of living rose.[5]

TANF Cuts Undo Progress and Deepen Existing Challenges

For 10 years, the TANF program continued to provide cash assistance to families in the District. Throughout this period, the Bowser administration devoted limited resources to understanding the experiences and needs of families enrolled in TANF—data necessary to inform program improvements, where possible.

More alarming was the Bowser administration's decision to walk back on the 2016 working group recommendations. For fiscal year (FY) 2026, Mayor Bowser proposed:

- Pausing cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) for TANF benefits;
- Increasing sanctions for not meeting work readiness requirements; and
- Reinstituting time limits for families receiving TANF for 60 months or more.[6]

These cuts threaten to undo years of progress in strengthening DC's TANF program, pushing families with children deeper into poverty. The greatest harm will fall on Black, women-led households who are disproportionately represented in DC's TANF caseload.[7] This impact will be especially severe as DC enters a local recession and child poverty rises, while federal and local cuts to government-provided healthcare, food assistance, and other essential supports leave families with fewer resources to make ends meet.

Importantly, these cuts will only worsen the struggles TANF enrollees are already facing. Even without benefit reductions, TANF cash assistance falls far short of what families need to make ends meet in DC's unaffordable economy.[8] Burdensome administrative processes add to this strain, making it harder for families to access and maintain the meager benefits available to them.[9] Meanwhile, the TANF Employment and Education Program (TEP) has consistently failed to connect participants with well-paying, sustainable work—a challenge compounded by the limited supply of quality jobs in the current labor market.[10]

The recommendations below address the current challenges facing TANF in DC and outline opportunities for the executive to stabilize the program, strengthen its support for families, and advance their long-term economic mobility.

Policy Recommendations

Within the mayor's first year in office, the new administration must reverse the aforementioned cuts (Recommendation #1). Restoring this funding is essential to preventing thousands of DC families from losing critical support and being pushed into even greater hardship.

At the same time, reversing these cuts and returning TANF to its previous state cannot be the administration's end goal. The current program falls short of providing families with the level of support they need to move out of poverty and achieve upward mobility. As families face growing economic pressures, DC must build a stronger safety net that can meet both their immediate needs and longer-term goals.

The following recommendations offer a roadmap for how the next administration can protect families who rely on TANF today while making the investments and policy changes needed to build a stronger, more effective program for the future. The recommendations span three phases: actions to take in the first 30 days, priorities to advance within the first 100 days, and longer-term reforms to pursue throughout the administration's tenure.

Recommendation #1: Reverse TANF Cuts to Protect Families From Immediate Hardship

In the FY 2027 budget, DC lawmakers approved a series of cuts that will reduce benefits for thousands of families enrolled in TANF, with some cuts threatening to eliminate assistance entirely. One of these changes—pausing the COLA—is already in effect, while others are slated for implementation in FY 2028. These cuts will undoubtedly devastate families, pushing households deeper into poverty and increasing the risk of hunger, homelessness, child neglect, and other harms that will strain children's health, safety, and development.

Cut #1: Pausing COLAs for TANF Benefits

DC's FY 2027 budget paused TANF's annual COLA, freezing monthly benefits at current levels ($803 for a family of three) throughout the financial plan. This drastically reduces the purchasing power of cash assistance for households receiving TANF. By FY 2030, inflation will erode the value of benefits for a family of three by 9 percent.[11] For families in poverty, that lost support could mean the difference between crisis and stability.

These projected losses are particularly concerning in DC, where the cost of basic necessities ranks among the highest in the country and is expected to keep rising.[12] While inflation affects everyone, it disproportionately harms households with low incomes—including those receiving TANF—because they have less flexibility to cut discretionary purchases as prices rise.[13]

Cut #2: Increasing Sanctions for Not Meeting Work Readiness Requirements

DC lawmakers approved a policy that will significantly increase the penalty TANF enrollees face if they cannot meet work participation requirements, raising the sanction of their monthly family benefit from 6 percent to 25 percent beginning in FY 2028.

Evidence from other states overwhelmingly shows that work sanctions fail to improve employment outcomes for TANF enrollees.[14] Beyond failing to improve employment outcomes, sanctions actively harm families, particularly children.[15]

Ultimately, sanctions are both ineffective and harmful because they stem from a fundamentally flawed—and historically racialized—assumption that TANF enrollees need a "stick" to compel them to work. Punitive policies do nothing to address the structural barriers TANF enrollees face in securing and maintaining long-term employment, including inaccessible childcare, physical and mental health challenges, and a limited supply of jobs that offer adequate wages.[16] By ignoring these realities, sanctions fail to tackle the root causes of unemployment and instead punish families for conditions beyond their control.

Cut #3: Reinstating Time Limits for Families Receiving TANF for 60 Months or More

DC lawmakers approved a policy that reinstates a five-year lifetime limit for TANF benefits. This change eliminates TANF benefits entirely for caretakers who have received assistance for more than 60 months, beginning in FY 2028. In doing so, it undermines DC's prior, progressive commitment to envisioning TANF as a dynamic, flexible program willing to accommodate residents' shifting needs.

Imposing a time limit on TANF benefits is a flawed policy because it unrealistically assumes a family raising children for at least 18 years will need help for only 60 months in total. In reality, the barriers that keep families in poverty (e.g., physical and mental health challenges, lack of affordable childcare, housing instability, and economic downturns) are rarely short-term. Even in rare cases where a family achieves stability within the short, five-year window, time limits rest on the misguided assumption that hardship will never return. This ignores the volatility of low-wage work and the reality that financial stability can quickly unravel due to events like sudden job loss, a reduction in hours, illness, pregnancy, or a family emergency. In practice, some families do not receive TANF continuously for five years but instead cycle on and off the program as circumstances change. A cumulative time limit does not account for these fluctuations and can therefore leave families without support precisely when they experience renewed need. DC can look to evidence from other states to understand the likely consequences of adopting a TANF time limit.[17]

A robust hardship exemption policy could help mitigate some of the harms associated with a time limit. If the District introduces time limits of any kind, we recommend adopting the set of exemptions, extensions, and procedural requirements outlined in *The TANF Reductions in FY27 and FY28 Are Not Informed, Do Not Account for Current Realities in the District, and Will Ultimately Harm Thousands of Children*.

Proposals:

- [100 days] In the FY 2028 budget proposal, the new administration should reverse the proposed cuts to TANF to provide stability for families. To fully restore funding to TANF and reverse the already existing cuts, the executive must:

	FY2028	FY2029	FY2030	FY2031	Total
Restore funding for TANF's COLA	$11.4 M	$17.3 M	TBD	TBD	$28.77 M
Keep TANF sanctions at 6 percent	$2 M	$ 2 M	$2 M	$2 M	$8 M
Prevent the reinstatement of the 60-month time limit on TANF benefits	$21.8 M	$11.1 M	$11.4 M	TBD	$31.47 M

Recommendation #2: Address Shortcomings in TANF Program Design and Implementation

The current TANF program is bogged down by administrative hurdles that make it difficult for families to apply for and maintain benefits. As long as the District uses federal funds to support cash assistance, TANF families will remain subject to burdensome federal requirements that contribute to these administrative barriers. If the new administration chooses to maintain this funding structure (see Recommendation #3 for an alternative approach), it must prioritize the programmatic and administrative improvements necessary to ensure that no eligible person is denied or loses benefits because of unnecessary red tape.

Gap #1: Administrative Burden Undermines Access to TANF

The process of applying for and maintaining benefits is extremely burdensome. There are several opportunities to improve the TANF application and recertification process.

First, because DHS does not streamline the program requirements overseen by its Economic Security Administration (ESA) and Office of Work Opportunity (OWO) divisions, it unduly convolutes the process by which someone applies for and annually renews for TANF. Prospective applicants and current recipients alike must first interface with DHS to determine their eligibility for TANF (disclosing and verifying factors like income, household size, immigration status, etc.) before complying with OWO's work assessment requirements via an entirely different eligibility infrastructure. This bifurcated process imposes an administrative burden on TANF enrollees, who often don't know what information to share with which DHS division, and information shared with one is often not shared with the other.

Despite ESA and OWO operating as related subdivisions of DHS, there appears to be very little client-centered cooperation between the two divisions or within DHS as a whole. For example, legal advocates must frequently contest DHS' imposition of work requirement sanctions on recipients' TANF benefits when OWO has failed to communicate to ESA that the recipient has verified their employment status. Another example is that DHS asks for people to submit documents that the family already submitted to DHS, either for TANF or for other programs, such as Medicaid or SNAP.

Ironing out better interagency communication and information sharing (while ensuring adequate protections from federal intervention) can help identify opportunities to streamline and simplify the application process.[18] DC families must interpret confusing or erroneous DHS notices about their benefits and can face benefit terminations, even if they provide all requested information, because DHS delays processing recertifications and verifications, often due to lost documents.[19]

Moreover, the DC Access System (DCAS) fails to streamline applications and renewals. DCAS serves as the integrated eligibility and case management platform used to enroll residents in health and human service benefits like Medicaid, SNAP, and TANF. As was made clear in a recent Roundtable with the DC Council Committee on Health and Committee on Human Services, DCAS is not getting it right.[20] DCAS needs dedicated time and attention from both DHS and DHCF, along with community partners, to support improved implementation. The working group described above could assist with examining pain points in DCAS and identifying opportunities for improvement.

TANF recipients also routinely report a lack of support and, worse, disrespectful treatment from DHS Service Center staff in navigating the confusing application and renewal process. This fuels distrust in TANF recipients and discourages eligible residents from accessing benefits to which they are entitled. Overall, administrative burden is a well-documented issue within public benefits like TANF and can in fact cause health harms.[21] DHS should work diligently with relevant sister agencies to streamline information collection, share relevant data to inform practices, train service center staff to create a helping culture, and avoid duplication of efforts.

Proposals:

- [100 days] Develop information-sharing agreements between agencies (e.g., DHS, OSSE, DHCF, DOES) and their subdivisions (e.g., OWO and ESA) to streamline and simplify the administrative processes.
- [Long-term] Examine DHS' application process, recertifications, and request for verifications to develop strategies to reduce administrative burdens on TANF applicants and beneficiaries.
- [Long-term] Examine the efficiency and efficacy of District Access System (DCAS) platforms, like District Direct, in facilitating enrollment in, and continued maintenance of, TANF and other District benefits.

Gap #2: The District Lacks a Consistent Partnership With Community Stakeholders

Currently, DHS hosts monthly advocate meetings—the only space for consistent community & government meetings. However, currently, the meetings are often canceled, and when they do take place, they are usually one-sided (DHS presenting to advocates) and leave limited time for questions. Additionally, no agenda is shared beforehand, and advocates have no opportunity to add items. Simple changes to meeting practices could significantly improve public-private partnership.

There is general difficulty navigating TANF due to a breakdown in relationships between participants and the agency, frontline workers and agency leadership, and advocates and agency staff. As described later, reducing administrative burden could and should improve some of the strain. But in general, the District needs to hit a reset on improving key relationships, making sure we are working together. A more human-centered approach to TANF could help rebuild some of the damage done over the years by repeated stress, limited communication, opaque sharing, and limited feedback loops between relevant stakeholders.

Proposal:

- [30 days] Create a consistent community and government partnership (e.g., use the existing ESA meetings but ensure there is a non-governmental co-chair that supports the development and leadership of the agenda).

Gap #3: TANF Guidance is Outdated

One pervasive issue is that the agency is not willing to share information that would better inform advocates. DHS's most recent publication of ESA's policies and procedures concerning TANF was published on January 9, 2019.[22] Some policies are outdated, and DHS does not publish other materials when policies are updated or changed regarding TANF administration. It is also silent on how ESA handles certain situations, such as how TANF applicants and enrollees are screened for the Program on Work, Employment and Responsibility (POWER), how DHS determines which parent can receive TANF on behalf of their children in situations involving joint custody, and other important information that should be made publicly available.

Proposal:

- [30 days] Update and publicize all policies/practices (e.g., internal guidance, policy memoranda, standard operating procedures).

Recommendation #3: The Administration Should Explore Further Opportunities to Make TANF More Supportive of Family Stability

Reversing proposed TANF cuts and addressing implementation shortcomings are vital first steps in helping families achieve greater economic stability. Once the District addresses the current gaps addressed above (i.e., reducing administrative burden, establishing true partnership, and increasing transparency), the new administration should work with the community to consider other opportunities to make TANF more supportive of families.

Although TANF cash assistance serves as a critical lifeline for families, benefit levels remain far too low to meet families' basic needs, let alone lift them out of poverty. In 2026, the maximum TANF benefit for a family of three in DC—$803 per month—equaled just 35 percent of the federal poverty level, and some families received less due to DHS-imposed sanctions. Although DC's maximum benefit exceeds that of the median state, it falls well below benefits in other high-cost-of-living jurisdictions, like New Hampshire ($1,366) and California ($1,314).[23] Moreover, the TANF amount is approximately 6 percent of what a family with one adult and two children needs to afford a modest but adequate standard of living in DC ($13,773 per month, estimated by the Economic Policy Institute).[24]

Inadequate benefits do more than leave families unable to afford basic necessities; they can also affect families' safety. For example, in DC, domestic violence is rising at the same time economic insecurity is rising. Economic insecurity is a leading reason why survivors stay longer in or return to abusive relationships, making cash assistance an even more critical safety tool for these families.[25] Adequate TANF benefits can support survivors and their families to leave an unsafe situation, have the time and space to heal, and start back on the path to autonomy.

When nearly all their resources go toward immediate needs, families have little opportunity to build savings or pursue higher education and other opportunities that could improve their long-term financial stability. These challenges are compounded by the benefits cliff, or the steep decline in public benefits when earnings rise. In DC, TANF benefits begin to decline once an enrollee makes just $160 per month—well before they're earning enough income to fully sustain their families.[26] Reducing their already meager assistance at this stage can make the transition to work more difficult and leave families worse off financially, particularly when factoring in losses in other benefits and the additional out-of-pocket costs of employment.

Proposals (more details provided in Appendix 1):

- [Long-term] Raise TANF benefits to at least 50 percent of the FPL in a future budget proposal.
- [Long-term] Mitigate the harmful effects of the benefits cliff.
- [Long-term] Explore opportunities to use TANF funds creatively to provide non-recurrent, short-term (NRST) assistance to low-income families facing financial emergencies.

- [Long-term] Connect working families to free tax preparation and tax credits.
- [Long-term] Eliminate the TANF asset test and align settlement exclusions with SNAP.

Recommendation #4: Explore The Feasibility of Shifting TANF Funding from Assistance-Based to Non-Assistance-Based Spending

Many of the burdens of the current TANF program are created because the District currently prioritizes the federal TANF block grant and the MOE funds for assistance activity and therefore must comply with the restrictive federal TANF requirements for assistance activities.

The federal TANF block grant can also be spent on non-assistance activities in the District. Most states spend their TANF dollars on non-assistance expenditures (meaning non-cash payments or vouchers) like childcare, education and training activities, and child welfare. States are generally allowed to spend TANF funds on non-assistance services rather than assistance as long as these services are reasonably calculated to meet TANF's statutory purposes. Importantly, non-assistance expenditures are not subject to the requirements of assistance expenditures, meaning work requirements, time limits, and sanctions do not apply.

TANF and MOE funds can be used strategically to fund TANF-eligible services considered "non-assistance," as long as the local savings in the recipient program are re-routed as local funding to support cash assistance. For example, DC spends $37 million in TANF funds to support childcare for working families instead of $37 million on cash-based assistance. The $37 million from the federal TANF block grant would free up $37 million in local funds for local cash assistance. Under this proposal, funding for both childcare and TANF would remain the same. But the shifts in how funds are spent would completely eliminate time limits and work requirements for TANF recipients.

The District should consider taking the federal TANF block grant and MOE funds and applying them to non-assistance programs in the District that currently rely on local dollars. This would free up local dollars for cash-based assistance and remove the administrative burden of determining work requirements, time limits, and sanctions. Many states supplant their local budget with TANF block grant and MOE funds. However, in the District this would be both/and: we spend both federal TANF block grant dollars and MOE dollars, and we have local dollars that give the District some flexibility.

If the District were to shift how TANF dollars are spent, there would need to be considerable effort in the design and implementation of the shift, particularly to ensure the local dollars are not cut. Additionally, the District must assess how it can improve workforce development and upward mobility by using many of the recommendations shared in this memo.

To begin to assess the financial feasibility of shifting TANF dollars and building towards change, the District must create transparency within its budget. Currently, the total funds for TANF are opaque—it is unclear to the public the breakdown of: (1) federal TANF dollars; (2) MOE dollars; and (3) local dollars (including TEP and POWER funds). It must be clear what the total is in each bucket, the requirements for each, and whether there are opportunities to better leverage federal dollars to ensure the financial investment needed to stabilize families and support upward mobility.[27]

Currently, the TANF funding breakdown is not readily available, accessible, or understandable. The funding structure is not easily ascertainable from the public budget books, and we have to rely on insight from the Council and executive budget offices to try to understand the TANF budget.

Proposals:

- [30 days] Make available to the public a comprehensive breakdown of TANF spending (federal funds, MOE funds, other local dollars, POWER funds).
- [Long-term] Explore the feasibility of shifting the federal TANF block grant from assistance to non-assistance spending in the District to free up local dollars to be spent on more flexible support for District residents.

This is a bold approach, but one that could streamline spending and lessen the District's administrative burden. It cannot be done in a silo and must be done in partnership, particularly to ensure equitable spending of local dollars. There is an opportunity to address many TANF issues more comprehensively by shifting TANF funding from cash-based assistance to non-assistance activities.

Recommendation #5: Build Supportive Pathways to Upward Mobility

If the administration chooses to pursue the alternative funding structure outlined in Recommendation #3, they will have greater flexibility to build a pathway to upward mobility for TANF enrollees without the constraints of punitive federal requirements. Regardless of the funding structure it adopts, however, DC must move beyond treating work as a checkbox exercise. Instead, workforce development should be viewed as a way to meaningfully connect public benefit recipients with access to upward mobility and independence.

Robust employment services are central, albeit one part, to a strong upward mobility framework, both because parents must meet work-related requirements for numerous public benefit programs and because matching enrollees with appropriate jobs can potentially improve economic mobility (so long as those jobs are well-paid, family-appropriate, etc.). Better connecting District families with meaningful employment and building towards upward mobility cannot begin until the gaps described below are addressed.

Gap #1: The District Lacks Data to Inform Best Practices, Needed Changes, and Future Opportunities

Currently, DHS's primary avenue for sharing data with the community is through annual performance oversight responses. Although advocates work with the Council's Committee on Human Services to develop questions, this past year, DHS was unable to answer many of them (see Appendix 2). Many of the responses DHS did provide were also unclear, with no meaningful opportunity for advocates to ask follow-up questions or seek clarification. DHS can sometimes answer questions and solve issues on an individual level—so long as advocates have a relationship with agency staff.

Creating an upward mobility framework requires a clear understanding of the families currently being served by public benefits like TANF. Currently, DHS primarily tracks program outputs, such as how many families receive TANF, participate in TEP, or face sanctions. While these measures help monitor program

operations, they reveal little about families' actual experiences. As Clarence H. Carter, former director of DC's Department of Human Services, shares in a recent article, "The next generation of reform should ask different questions: Are families becoming more stable? Are children more likely to thrive? Are parents moving toward sustainable employment? These questions are harder to answer than whether benefits were delivered or requirements enforced. But they are closer to what the safety net is ultimately intended to accomplish."[28]

The District needs improved definitions and measurements for employment outcomes.[29] Until we change our measures in the District to place greater emphasis on skills and employment outcomes in TANF, rather than procedural compliance with a work participation rate, we will never see the results of moving people from needing government assistance to economic and family stability.

Importantly, robust data collection cannot occur without directly hearing from TANF enrollees. DHS must regularly engage TANF enrollees and incorporate their experiences into program evaluation and reform. Beyond gaps in data collection, DHS could do far more to ensure advocates have access to the data it does collect. Transparency is essential to an effective partnership between the agency and advocates, particularly those who work directly with TANF participants and can help identify gaps in services and implementation.

Proposals (more details provided in Appendix 3):

- [30 days] Create a consistent community and government partnership (see Recommendation #2).
- [30 days] Through community and government partnership, work with stakeholders to identify relevant outcome-based data currently collected by DHS, analyze and publish the relevant data, and create processes for unavailable data that can/should be collected to better inform upward mobility.
- [Long-term] Create accountability metrics to assess both the implementation of TANF and upward mobility of participants. Align these metrics across contractors and agencies' performance evaluation.

Gap #2: The District's Workforce Development Programming is Disjointed and Uncoordinated

The TANF Employment and Education Program (TEP) is an example of a workforce development program not functioning as an effective pathway to employment. In FY 2025, an annual average of just 15 percent of TEP participants engaged in eligible activities, and the program averaged only 10 job placements for every 1,000 work-eligible TANF enrollees.[30] Among other reasons, DHS cited "federal job cuts… compounded by budget constraints and slowed hiring in key sectors like hospitality, healthcare, and administrative services" as key contributors to poor employment connections for TANF recipients.[31]

DHS has made several efforts to improve job-connection performance, including TEP's 2024 redesign.[32] The agency is also launching Jumpstart to Jobs (J2J), a pilot initiative focused on creating career pathways for TEP participants, and has recently proposed new rules to update payments to TEP employment service providers.[33] These efforts signal a recognition that the current model needs improvement, but they are not rooted in the realities facing job seekers in the District.

These changes to employment programs do not address the shortage of jobs, particularly family-sustaining jobs, versus the number of job seekers in DC,[34] nor do they change how job programs, like TEP, will actually connect parents to the limited available opportunities and in-demand. Continuing to incrementally change TEP and other job programs, while ignoring these realities, will result in the same conversations for another 15 years.[35]

Ultimately, DC is taking a piecemeal approach to workforce development—jumping from opportunity to opportunity—instead of pursuing a holistic, cross-District effort to create employment opportunities and ensure a strong safety net. The District lacks a clear, comprehensive picture of the agencies (e.g., DHS, OSSE, and DOES) and community organizations working to connect residents to employment and advance economic mobility (e.g., Early Childhood Innovation Network, Briya Public Charter School, George Washington University Institute for Socioeconomic Opportunity, Georgetown University Thrive Center).

Proposals (more details provided in Appendix 3):

- [100 days] Conduct a formal evaluation of TEP. (see Appendix 4).
- [Long-term] Coordinate workforce development programs across the District.

Gap #3: Lack of Investment in Supports to Overcome Personal and Logistical Challenges to Keeping a Job

The District also must align supports that help overcome personal and logistical challenges that make it hard to get and keep a job. Ensuring TANF recipients are connected with services like childcare, domestic violence services, substance abuse treatment, and physical and mental health services is critical, on top of job placement. However, assessments and referrals to specialized services are not consistent. We need to standardize the processes that connect families with the supports available in the District and ensure they have the tools to engage in the workforce.

Proposal (more details provided in Appendix 3):

- [Long-term] Analyze where jobs are compared to where TANF recipients live and think creatively about how to connect TANF recipients to jobs they might be able to do with the right supports like transportation, childcare, etc.

Appendix & Endnotes

Appendix 1: Details on Opportunities to Make TANF More Supportive of Family Stability

- **Raise TANF benefits to at least 50 percent of the FPL in a future budget proposal.** Tying benefits to the FPL would give families more meaningful support and ensure assistance keeps pace with annual changes in poverty guidelines, rather than losing value over time. National experts have called for a minimum benefit of at least 50 percent of the FPL, but some states have set even higher benchmarks. New Hampshire ties benefits to 60 percent of the FPL based on family size. California ties benefits to 50 percent of the FPL for the TANF family size plus one additional person (recognizing that many families enrolled in TANF live with additional household members who are not included in the assistance unit). By contrast, DC does not tie benefits to the FPL, and maximum benefits have hovered around 34 to 37 percent of the FPL over the past decade.
- **Mitigate the harmful effects of the benefits cliff.** DC begins reducing TANF benefits when enrollees earn just $160 per month, cutting benefits by $1 for every additional $3 earned (a marginal tax rate of 33 percent). The administration should explore changes to TANF's earned income disregard and benefit phase-out rate to help families keep more of their earnings as they transition to work. Massachusetts and Rhode Island, for example, disregard 100 percent of earnings during the first six months of employment. Ultimately, any proposed changes should account for potential effects on other safety net benefits, including SNAP. DC is currently deploying a pilot program—Career Mobility Action Plan (Career MAP)—which, in part, is working to address the benefits cliff. DC residents in Career MAP receive a variety of supports to increase their upward economic mobility as well as cash assistance to mitigate the harms of increasing incomes and decreasing public benefits. For example, Career MAP provides a cash fund of up to $10,000 per year to reimburse participants for any losses of medical and childcare benefits as a family's income increases, as well as any SNAP or TANF losses that can't be covered through rent discounts. *See* https://dhs.dc.gov/page/career-map; https://pn3policy.org/economic-supports/state-strategies-to-address-the-benefits-cliff/.
- **Explore opportunities to use TANF funds creatively to provide non-recurrent, short-term (NRST) assistance to low-income families facing financial emergencies, including families not enrolled in TANF**. TANF NRST benefits can take the form of one-time or short-term cash payments, vouchers, or direct services to help families navigate specific crises without triggering TANF time limits or work and child support requirements. DC and the states can use these funds for a range of needs, including emergency housing assistance, back-to-school expenses, and unrestricted cash. For example, Michigan's Rx Kids program combines TANF NRST funds with private funding to provide cash assistance during pregnancy and infancy to families across participating communities. The District could consider a similar program for Wards 7 and 8.
- **Connect working families to free tax preparation and tax credits.** The Mayor should direct DHS to connect TANF enrollees with earned income to free tax preparation services and provide guidance on claiming the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Child Tax Credit (CTC), and other tax

benefits for which they qualify. These credits can boost families' income and further reduce financial hardship.

- **Eliminate the TANF asset test and align settlement exclusions with SNAP.** As families increase their income, they should be able to build savings without risking access to critical assistance. However, DC limits TANF households to $3,000 in countable resources, or $4,500 if a household member is age 60 or older. This policy discourages family financial security and punishes TANF recipients in DC, the majority of whom are Black, for even modest attempts to establish multi-generational wealth via assets like savings accounts and inheritances. The mayor should eliminate the TANF asset limit to allow families to save for emergencies and build long-term financial security, following the lead of nine other states that have eliminated non-vehicle asset tests. The administration should also align TANF's treatment of legal settlements with SNAP to ensure families do not lose assistance because they receive compensation for harm or losses.

Appendix 2: Critical Missing Data from Department of Human Services (DHS)

- Does not track POWER denials [Q220]
- Does not track length of time for participating in POWER [Q221]
- Percent of TANF participants who are employed full-time upon leaving TANF [Q223]
- Does not track how many residents have case management and how many have multiple case managers [Q40]
- No labor force analysis and how to connect/match TANF customers to current landscape [Q230]
- Does not track the District's TANF work participation rate for each fiscal year from FY23 through FY26 to date [Q216]
- Does not "systematically" track how many TANF recipients who receive benefits for more than 60 months also have housing subsidy [Q232]
- No data sharing with DHCF (pending implementation), so was unable to answer how many people will be at risk of losing SNAP, TANF, and Medicaid due to changes [Post-hearing responses, Q14]
- Does not track families on childcare subsidy; said to check with OSSE [Post-hearing responses, Q16]

Appendix 3: Expanded Detail for Recommendations Focused on Building Supportive Pathways to Upward Mobility

- **Through an effective community and government partnership, work with stakeholders to identify relevant outcome-based data currently collected by DHS, analyze and publish the relevant data, and create processes for unavailable data that can/should be collected to better inform upward mobility**. Several states have also aligned performance metrics across workforce-focused programs, including SNAP Employment & Training and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). DC could pursue a similar approach by coordinating outcome measures across agencies that administer workforce services, including DOES, OSSE, and DDS, creating a more integrated system for tracking participant progress and program effectiveness. *See* Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance, TANF Works: Collaboration Resources, ACF Peer Technical Assistance Network, accessed November 6, 2026, https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/tanfworks/collaboration; National Skills Coalition, Strengthening TANF Through Workforce Development Partnerships (Washington, DC: National Skills Coalition, 2019), https://nationalskillscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/NSC-TANF-FINAL-6.24.19-MED-RES-pdf.pdf; Center for Skilled Workforce, WIOA and TANF Integration: Opportunities for Advancing Family Economic Mobility (Washington, DC: Center for Skilled Workforce, 2021), https://skilledwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/CSW-Brief-WIOA-TANF-Integration-Dec-2021.pdf.
- **Creating accountability metrics to assess both the implementation of TANF and the upward mobility of participants**. **Align these metrics across contractors and agencies' performance evaluation**. We must identify metrics and then build a better tracking system. More consistent, frequent sharing of outputs and outcomes will allow greater accountability for ensuring TANF recipients' success. Other states offer models for a more outcome-focused approach. For example, Utah tracks and assesses long-term family mobility through a multidimensional framework that includes education, family economic stability, health, housing affordability, and early childhood development. See Utah Department of Workforce Services, 2023 Intergenerational Poverty Report (Salt Lake City, UT: Utah Department of Workforce Services, 2023), https://jobs.utah.gov/edo/intergenerational/igp23.pdf. Colorado has also developed a TANF theory-of-change framework that includes short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes, allowing the state to recognize progress such as improved skills, reduced barriers to employment, and increased stability before participants achieve full economic self-sufficiency. Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab, Colorado TANF Outcomes Framework (Denver, CO: Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab, 2026), https://coloradolab.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/TANF-Outcomes_accessible.pdf. Several states also align performance measures across TANF, SNAP Employment and Training, and workforce programs, helping assess how services work together to support families. Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance, Integrating TANF and SNAP Employment Services, ACF Peer Technical Assistance Network, accessed November 6, 2026, https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/content/integrating-tanf-snap-employment-services.

- **Formal evaluation of TEP.** DHS is changing TEP provider rules and piloting J2J, but it has never conducted a full-scale assessment of the 2024 redesign. DHS must conduct a full-scale evaluation, engaging TEP participants, vendors, and staff to understand how the updates are actually performing.
- **Coordinate workforce development programs across the District.** The executive should leverage the Workforce Investment Council (WIC) to align and ensure collaboration with employers to create career pipelines. This should include clear plans to advance the workforce development system.
- **Analyze where jobs are compared to where TANF recipients live and think creatively about how to connect TANF recipients to jobs they might be able to do with the right supports like transportation, childcare, etc.** Simply undertaking a labor market analysis would be immensely beneficial to District residents. Additionally, better understanding the realities of District residents who are seeking employment and the barriers they face is critical to ensure consistent screening for available supports like childcare, substance abuse treatment, etc.

Appendix 4: Proposed TEP Evaluation Questions

An assessment of TEP should examine:

(1) the experiences and outcomes of participants pursuing the self-directed pathway;

(2) participants' perspectives on incentive milestones and whether completing them meaningfully improves employment outcomes;

(3) how vendors providing both employment and occupational training and job placement services are performing under new contracts; and

(4) whether simplified verification requirements are effectively reducing administrative burdens for participants and vendors.

Endnotes

[1] Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. *Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF): An Introduction*. https://www.cbpp.org/research/income-security/temporary-assistance-for-needy-families.
[2] *Id*.
[3] District of Columbia Department of Human Services. TANF Hardship Report. https://dhs.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dhs/publication/attachments/TANF%20Hardship%20Report_0.pdf.
[4] *Id*.
[5] DC Fiscal Policy Institute. Eliminating TANF's COLA Will Harm the District's Most Vulnerable Families. https://dcfpi.org/all/eliminating-tanfs-cola-will-harm-the-districts-most-vulnerable-families/.
[6] DC Fiscal Policy Institute. Punitive TANF Policies Will Push DC Families With Children Deeper Into Hardship. https://dcfpi.org/all/punitive-tanf-policies-will-push-dc-families-with-children-deeper-into-hardship/.
[7] Council of the District of Columbia. DHS Responses to Pre-FY25 Performance Oversight Hearing Questions. https://dccouncil.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/DHS-Responses-to-Pre-FY25-POH-Questions-FINAL.pdf.
[8] DC Fiscal Policy Institute. Punitive TANF Policies Will Push DC Families With Children Deeper Into Hardship. https://dcfpi.org/all/punitive-tanf-policies-will-push-dc-families-with-children-deeper-into-hardship/.
[9] *Id*.
[10] DC Fiscal Policy Institute. *Black Women Workers Are Discouraged in a Sluggish DC Economy*. https://dcfpi.org/all/black-women-workers-are-discouraged-in-a-sluggish-dc-economy/.
[11] DC Fiscal Policy Institute. Eliminating TANF's COLA Will Harm the District's Most Vulnerable Families. https://dcfpi.org/all/eliminating-tanfs-cola-will-harm-the-districts-most-vulnerable-families/.
[12] Urban Institute. *American Affordability Tracker*. https://www.urban.org/data-tools/american-affordability-tracker.
[13] Brainard, Lael. "Inflation and the Economics of Hardship." Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, April 5, 2022. https://www.federalreserve.gov/newsevents/speech/brainard20220405a.htm.
[14] Research from Kansas found that employment rates among parents who left TANF due to sanctions were virtually unchanged in the year before exit (67 percent) and the year after exit (68 percent). In the fourth year after exit, nearly 40 percent had no earnings at all, another 30 percent had earnings below the deep-poverty level, and overall median annual earnings were just $2,175 in 2016 dollars, or about 11 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL). *See* Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. *Evidence Doesn't Support Claims of Success of TANF Work Requirements*. https://www.cbpp.org/research/evidence-doesnt-support-claims-of-success-of-tanf-work-requirements.
[15] A Michigan study found that families subject to sanctions were far more likely than non-sanctioned families to experience utility shutoffs and resort to extreme survival strategies–such as pawning belongings, searching trash cans, or begging. Wu, Chi-Fang, et al. "How Do Sanctions Affect Welfare Recipients?" *Social Service Review*. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/342998. Meanwhile, a six-city study of TANF enrollees seeking emergency room treatment found that children in sanctioned families were 30 percent more likely to have been previously hospitalized, 50 percent more likely to be food insecure, and 90 percent more likely to be admitted to the hospital at the time of the emergency visit compared with children in non-sanctioned families. Children's HealthWatch. *The Effects of Welfare Sanctions on the Health of Children*. https://childrenshealthwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/welfare_7_02.pdf.
[16] DC Fiscal Policy Institute. Punitive TANF Policies Will Push DC Families With Children Deeper Into Hardship. https://dcfpi.org/all/punitive-tanf-policies-will-push-dc-families-with-children-deeper-into-hardship/.
[17] The same Kansas study discussed above finds that TANF enrollees who exited the program because they reached the time limit fared worse than both all leavers and those who exited due to work sanctions. Four years after exit, more than 60 percent had either no earnings or earnings below 25 percent of the federal poverty line ($5,040 for a family of three in 2016). Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. *Life After TANF in*

Kansas: For Most, Unsteady Work and Earnings Below Half of Poverty. https://www.cbpp.org/research/income-security/life-after-tanf-in-kansas-for-most-unsteady-work-and-earnings-below-half.

[18] For example, the Department of Human Services could identify where duplication was happening across agencies requiring duplicated efforts to provide information by beneficiaries.

[19] Department of Human Services could identify common barriers for recipients include adding a newborn to a TANF household specifically and annual recertifications generally.

[20] For example, DCAS should automatically exempt people from work requirements to relieve the burden on beneficiaries to prove their eligibility for an exemption. However, DCAS is failing to exempt some people and every time that DCAS gets it wrong, and a beneficiary has to appeal a decision, or DHS asks the person to fill out yet another form or submit yet another document, there is a risk that the person will fall through the cracks and not obtain the assistance that they desperately need and are eligible for.

[21] Health Affairs. *Administrative Burdens Can Harm Health*. https://www.healthaffairs.org/content/briefs/administrative-burdens-can-harm-health-1773889203949.

[22] District of Columbia Department of Human Services. *ESA Policy Manuals*. https://dhs.dc.gov/publication/esa-policy-manuals.

[23] Single Mother Guide. *New Hampshire TANF Benefits*. https://singlemotherguide.com/state/new-hampshire/TANF; Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services. *CalWORKs Factsheet*. https://dpss.lacounty.gov/en/cash/calworks/resources/cw-map-factsheet.html.

[24] Economic Policy Institute. *Family Budget Calculator*. https://www.epi.org/resources/budget/.

[25] National Resource Center on Domestic Violence. *Public Benefits and Economic Security for Survivors*. https://vawnet.org/sites/default/files/assets/files/2018-11/NRCDV_PublicBenefits-WeWouldHaveHadToStay-Nov2018.pdf.

[26]United Planning Organization. *Benefits Cliff Paper*. https://www.upo.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Benefits-cliff-paper-October-2024-resize.pdf.

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[28] Child Welfare Wonk. "Where Should TANF Go Next?" https://www.childwelfarewonk.com/p/weekly-wonk-where-should-tanf-go.

[29] Urban Institute. *Measuring Employment Outcomes in TANF*. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/98942/measuring_employment_outcomes_in_tanf_0.pdf.

[30] Office of the City Administrator. *FY25 Performance Accountability Report: DHS*. https://oca.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/oca/FY25%20PAR%20-%20DHS.pdf.

[31] District of Columbia Department of Human Services. *TANF Employment and Education Program (TEP) One Pager*. https://dhs.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dhs/service_content/attachments/TANF%20Employment%20and%20Education%20Program_%20One%20Pager_0.pdf.

[32] DC Register. Proposed Rulemaking on TANF Employment Service Providers. https://dcregs.dc.gov/Common/DCR/Issues/IssueCategoryList.aspx?CategoryID=28&IssueID=1208.

[33] *Id*.

[34] DC Fiscal Policy Institute. *Black Women Workers Are Discouraged in a Sluggish DC Economy*. https://dcfpi.org/all/black-women-workers-are-discouraged-in-a-sluggish-dc-economy/.

[35] The need to fundamentally reform TEP, rather than pursue incremental changes, is underscored by the DC Fiscal Policy Institute's (DCFPI) reports published in 2009 and 2026, which document strikingly similar shortcomings despite being nearly two decades apart. Both reports found that TEP takes a one-size-fits-all approach that fails to account for parents' individual skills and goals. They also found that parents are not consistently connected to the support they need to address existing barriers to work, including childcare, domestic violence services, substance use treatment, and physical and mental healthcare. DC Fiscal Policy Institute. Building on the Strengths of TANF in the District of Columbia (2009), https://dcfpi.org/all/32867/; DC Fiscal Policy Institute, Voices for Change: Perspectives on Strengthening Welfare-to-Work from DC TANF Recipients (2025), https://dcfpi.org/all/voices-for-change-perspectives-on-strengthening-welfare-to-work-

from-dc-tanf-recipients/; DC Fiscal Policy Institute, Building on the Strengths of TANF in the District of Columbia: Recommendations for the 2010 TANF Reauthorization (2009), https://dcfpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/11-12-09TANFreport.pdf.