



616 H Street, NW · Suite 300  
Washington, DC 20001  
T 202.467.4900 · F 202.467.4949  
[www.childrenslawcenter.org](http://www.childrenslawcenter.org)

Testimony before the District of Columbia Council  
Committee on Human Services  
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Performance Oversight Hearing  
Department of Human Services

Sharra E. Greer  
Policy Director  
Children's Law Center

Good morning Chairman Graham and members of the committee. My name is Sharra E. Greer. I am the Policy Director for Children's Law Center (CLC)<sup>1</sup> and a resident of the District. I am testifying today on behalf of CLC, the largest non-profit legal services organization in the District and the only such organization devoted to a full spectrum of children's legal services. Every year, we provide services to more than 2,000 low-income children and families, focusing on children who have been abused and neglected and children with special health and educational needs. Many of these children are living in homes that are currently receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) through the Department of Human Services (DHS).

I appreciate the opportunity to testify and will focus my testimony on DC's TANF program. TANF is a life sustaining bridge for many families in the deepest of poverty, as TANF recipients have household incomes that are up to 73% below the federal poverty guidelines.<sup>2</sup>

To provide a sense of the demographics of this population and what is at stake, it's important to know that while by definition, all families on TANF have children, approximately 47% of families receiving TANF in DC have at least one child under the age of three.<sup>3</sup> The first three years of life is a time of critical child development creating an important foundation for a lifetime of health and achievement. The positive and negative experiences children have during this period of rapid growth influence their physical and mental health, in addition to how and what they learn.<sup>4</sup> Research is clear

that stress and trauma during this time, including stressors of poverty and abuse and neglect, can have lifelong negative consequences.<sup>5</sup>

Though the link between cuts in TANF and increased difficulty in paying for housing and utilities may be apparent, there are other hidden impacts that are particularly devastating to children, their families, and ultimately, our community.<sup>6</sup> Cuts in TANF benefits have been shown to link directly to poor health outcomes and increased child hunger.<sup>7</sup> Reductions in welfare have an alarming link to increased child maltreatment and contact with the abuse and neglect system.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, children in families affected by benefit reductions do worse in a number of developmental areas and have lower scores on tests of quantitative and reading skills,<sup>9</sup> something with long-ranging impact on these children's ability to complete their education and find meaningful work as adults.

We recognize and support the District and DHS's moves to reform and redesign our city's TANF program so that it is more responsive to the residents who utilize it. The proposed budget has increased funding for DHS and a percentage of that increase will be dedicated to assisting families on TANF find stability through employment.<sup>10</sup> Further, the proposed budget provides additional supports to families, in the form of more employment and training options, and individualized assessments.

Unfortunately, a key and needed piece of reform is missing from the budget - exceptions to the time limits. Last year, Councilmember Graham introduced legislation,

the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Time Limit Amendment Act of 2012 (B19-0704), which sought to prevent thousands of families from seeing drastic cuts in benefits. The bill also added important exceptions to TANF time limits, such as disability or domestic violence. These were exceptions to the time limits that were already reflected in DC law— times when families were legally not required to be engaged in work activity. Unfortunately, this legislation did not become law. Without an exception that keeps the 60-month timeline from tolling for these families, we do them the greatest of disservices – acknowledging that they are unable to look for work while cutting their support for not finding work fast enough. Many of these exceptions are already acknowledged by other states as situations warranting exemption from TANF limitations.

We urge this council to include in this budget funds to toll the time limit for families but who have been excused under DC law from engaging in work activities. Failure to include these exemptions has the impact of financially penalizing families who the law recognizes are unable to look for work.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Children’s Law Center works to give every child in the District of Columbia family, health and education. As the largest nonprofit legal services provider in the District, our 80-person staff partners

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with hundreds of pro bono attorneys to serve over 2,000 at-risk children each year. Applying the knowledge gained from this direct representation, we advocate for changes in the city's laws, policies and programs. For more information, visit [www.childrenslawcenter.org](http://www.childrenslawcenter.org).

<sup>2</sup> Currently, 30% of DC's children are living in poverty. See, Annie E Casey Foundation, *2012 Kids Count Data Book*, Profiles on Key Indicators of Child Well-being, District of Columbia. Available at: <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/DataBook/2012/StateProfileSheets.aspx>. However, a family of three receiving full TANF benefits will receive \$428 per month, or \$5,136 a year. The federal poverty guideline defines poverty as for a family of three as less than \$19,530 a year. <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/13poverty.cfm#guidelines>.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance, "Table 34: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families – Active Cases, Percent Distribution of TANF Youngest Child Recipient by Age Group." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/resource/character/fy2010/fy2010-chap10-ys-final>, Appendix Table 34, line 19.

<sup>4</sup> See Improving Part C Early Intervention: Using What We Know About Infants and Toddlers With Disabilities to Reauthorize Part C of IDEA, Zero to Three Policy Center, February 2003. <http://main.zerotothree.org/site/DocServer/PartC.pdf?docID=567&AddInterest=1161>

<sup>5</sup> In Brief: The Impact of Early Adversity on Children's Development; Harvard University Center on the Developing Child; [http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/briefs/inbrief\\_series/inbrief\\_the\\_impact\\_of\\_early\\_adversity/](http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/briefs/inbrief_series/inbrief_the_impact_of_early_adversity/)

<sup>6</sup> We refer in this paragraph to cuts in benefits that are not related to a parent who has achieved gainful employment or another source of income.

<sup>7</sup> See, Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program, *The Impact of Welfare Sanctions on the Health of Infants and Toddlers*, 4 (July 2002). Infants and toddlers (up to the 3 years) in families who benefits had been terminated or reduced had a 30% higher risk of having been hospitalized, a 90% higher risk of being admitted to the hospital when visiting an emergency room and a 50% higher risk of being food insecure than children in families whose benefits had not been decreased. See also, West Coast Poverty Center, *Review of Research on TANF Sanctions, Report to Washington State WorkFirst SubCabinet*, (2006).

<sup>8</sup> The largest and most comprehensive study, which reviews data from all states from 1990-1998: Christina Paxson & Jane Waldfogel, Welfare Reforms, Family Resources, and Child Maltreatment, *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2003). Two other studies (of Michigan and Illinois) found a link between family sanctions and increased contact with child protective services or the increased odds of having a child maltreatment allegation. Although one study (Milwaukee) found no link between family sanctions and child welfare involvement. West Coast Poverty Center, *Review of Research on TANF Sanctions, Report to Washington State WorkFirst SubCabinet*, 37 (2006). Also see the direct link in DC between the housing instability that can be caused by cuts to benefits and involvement in the abuse and neglect system at Government of the District of Columbia, Child and Family Services Agency, *Implementing the Adoption and Safe Families Amendment Act of 2000 in the District of Columbia* (2009 Annual Report), 31.

<sup>9</sup> See, West Coast Poverty Center, *Review of Research on TANF Sanctions, Report to Washington State WorkFirst SubCabinet*, (2006).

<sup>10</sup> See, FY2014 Proposed Budget and Financial Plan, Volume 3 Agency Budget Chapters Part II, Human Support Services, Department of Human Services, "FY2014 Proposed Operating Budget and FTEs, by Division and Activity" at p. E-7 (illustrating that under line 2000-Income Maintenance, there is an increase of 81 case managers), and "FY 2014 Proposed Budget Changes" at p. E-9 (indicating an additional 34 FTEs for the TANF grant, and an increase of \$2,519,380 for the TANF employment

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program). Also available at

[http://cfo.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ocfo/publication/attachments/DC\\_Government\\_FY2014\\_Budget\\_Volume\\_3.pdf](http://cfo.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ocfo/publication/attachments/DC_Government_FY2014_Budget_Volume_3.pdf).