



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of Domestic Social Development

TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE TO NEEDY FAMILIES (TANF) February 2009

ISSUE

The Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) was enacted into law in 1996 and reauthorized through September 2010 by President Bush in 2006. TANF eliminated the federal entitlement to cash assistance with a block grant for states. TANF replaced the welfare program known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with a “welfare to work” approach. TANF requires work as a condition of receiving benefits, imposes time limits and sanctions, focuses on family formation issues, and places most of the control over administering welfare into the hands of the states. The current economic recession poses challenges to the revamped system, which has shown mixed results, in that some states show reduced welfare rolls when their unemployment levels are on the rise.

BACKGROUND

Current public policy on welfare emphasizes that those who can work should work. People in turn need decent jobs at decent wages. The following TANF provisions are of particular interest, especially given the unprecedented levels of unemployment and economic recession:

Work provisions: In order for a state to get credit and full funding for the federal TANF grant to the state for work activities performed by a given TANF participant, each participant must work a minimum number of hours per week – 30 hours for most people. Both the list of specific work activities and the number of hours recipients must work each week were unchanged during reauthorization. States are now required to apply these work rules to state-funded welfare programs, as well as the federal program. The DRA legislation also recalculated the caseload reduction credit that many states utilize to meet their work participation rates.

Changes to the TANF work rules means that many states faced significant increases in the percentage of TANF families that needed to meet the hourly work requirements each month or else face a reduction in the state’s federal TANF grant. The recent economic recession has also placed additional pressure on states to find adequate employment opportunities for TANF recipients. Some may feel pressure to reduce caseloads to meet the new requirements, by making it harder for families to enroll in or stay on TANF. The Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) was given new authority to set regulations on whether activities qualify as allowable work activities, tracking and reporting on hours worked, and whether to include child-only cases when calculating state work participation rates. HHS published new final rules on reauthorization of TANF on February 5, 2008. Some of the new changes include allowing states to count certain hours of participation for individuals who might not otherwise have been counted in the work participation rate; allowing up to 12 months of baccalaureate or advanced degree education to count as vocational education; and allowing one hour of unsupervised homework time for each hour spent in class. The rule also allows states to calculate excused absences by the hour instead of by the day.

Supports for Working Families: For families leaving welfare, the availability of work supports, such as child care, health care, and supplemental nutrition assistance (previously known as food stamps), can be key to making a lasting transition to self-sufficiency. Under the economic stimulus legislation signed into law on February 17, 2009, *The American Recovery Reinvestment Act of 2009*, the Transitional Medical Assistance program for families leaving TANF has been extended through December 2010 and child care funding was increased by \$2 billion.

Fairness for Legal Immigrants: Legal immigrants continue to face a five-year waiting period before they can apply for TANF. The Catholic community has long advocated for the availability of basic necessities to all those in need, regardless of their race, creed, ethnic origin, or nationality, and we have worked to restore necessary benefit eligibility for legal immigrants.

Marriage and Family Issues: The Catholic community has consistently affirmed the vital importance of marriage for raising children. Children do better economically, emotionally, and spiritually when raised by parents in the context of a stable, healthy marriage. The changes in the TANF work rules are likely to make it harder for two-parent families to receive TANF – they are subject to more stringent work rules than single parent families. States have less flexibility than before to create separate programs for two-parent families that do not meet the federal requirements. The “family cap” – which allows states to deny TANF benefits to children born while their family is receiving assistance, violating both pro-life and social justice principles – remains in the law. On the positive side, there is new funding for programs to support healthy marriages and strong families and for effective fatherhood programs.

USCCB and CCUSA POSITION

Our nation’s welfare policies play an important role in serving the common good by addressing the needs of the most vulnerable families among us. How we treat the most vulnerable is a basic moral measure of any society.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Charities USA support welfare policies that: protect human life and dignity; strengthen family life; encourage and reward work; preserve a safety net for the vulnerable; build public/private partnerships to overcome poverty; and invest in human dignity. In their 1991 statement, *Putting Children and Families First*, the U.S. Bishops stated, “We reiterate our call for a minimum national welfare benefit that will permit children and their parents to live in dignity. A decent society will not balance its budget on the backs of poor children. Sadly, the fiscal difficulties in many of our states have meant disproportionate cuts and unfair burdens for poor families.”

ACTION REQUESTED

- Continue to advocate, at the federal, state and local levels, on behalf of families who are struggling due to the soaring levels of unemployment, lack of housing, and the current economic crisis.
- Work with community organizations, local advocates and state officials to make sure new policies help and do not hurt families on TANF, as states make changes in TANF rules and programs to comply with the new federal rules.
- Support efforts to increase child care funding.
- Support efforts to bring the rules for two-parent families in line with those for single parent families.
- Continue to work on efforts to make TANF benefits available to all legal immigrants.
- Continue to work at the state and federal level to end the “family cap.”
- Work to improve education and training opportunities for TANF recipients.
- Work to remove employment barriers for individuals with disabilities.
- Support funding for abstinence education programs.

RESOURCES

Moral Principles and Policy Priorities for Welfare Reform (1995); *Putting Children and Families First* (1991).

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