



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

TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE TO NEEDY FAMILIES (TANF) February 2011

ISSUE

The nation's welfare policies play an important role in serving the common good by addressing the needs of the most vulnerable families. How society treats its most vulnerable is a basic moral test. In 1996, welfare reform led to the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, which replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). TANF eliminated the AFDC entitlement to assistance, required work as a condition of receiving benefits, imposed time limits and sanctions, focused on family formation issues, and placed most of the control over administering welfare in statehouses.

As Congress completed its business at the end of 2010, it passed a one-year reauthorization of TANF through 2011 that made very few policy changes to the program. It maintained the \$16.5 billion block grant, which means the funding level has not changed since the creation of TANF in 1996. As a result, inflation has eroded the real value of the benefits by 28%.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, enacted to respond to the recession, created the Emergency Contingency Fund within TANF so that states had access to additional resources to meet increased demand. Despite the success of the program--approximately 250,000 jobs were created, in addition to the other assistance it provided--Congress allowed the program to expire at the end of FY 2010.

BACKGROUND

Supports for Working Families: For families leaving welfare, the availability of work supports, such as child care, health care, transportation, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, previously known as "food stamps"), can be key to making a lasting transition to economic self-sufficiency.

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. TANF work rules continue 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.

Work provisions: Recent research shows that when TANF required work as a condition of receiving benefits, imposed time limits and sanctions, and gave states the flexibility to apply federal work rules to its programs, states were rewarded with increased levels of funding for their ability to reduce their caseloads. One aspect of this is that many states focused on serving the most employable clients and often left out those with the greatest need and obstacles to employment.

In order for a state to receive credit and full funding for the federal TANF grant for “allowable work activities” performed by a participant, each participant must work a minimum number of hours per week (30 hours for most people). In 2008, the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) implemented changes that were helpful in giving states the flexibility around work requirements. For example, states could count certain hours of participation--in most cases, educational classes--for individuals that might not otherwise be counted in the work participation rate.

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 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.

USCCB POSITION

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops supports 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 *Putting Children and Families First*, the bishops of the United States write:

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

Urge Congress to undertake a full reauthorization of TANF and strengthen the program so that it better serves families and individuals in need to help them make a successful transition to work and provide adequately for themselves and their family.

Urge Congress to combat the root causes of economic inequality by funding initiatives that reduce poverty and strengthen families, such as marriage education, abstinence programs, responsible fatherhood initiatives especially in low-income communities. Also, it is essential Congress extend low-income tax credits that encourage work.

Work with community organizations, local advocates and state officials to assure that states are complying with TANF federal rules and helping families escape poverty. .

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Tom Mulloy, Domestic Policy Advisor, USCCB; 202-541-3445, tmulloy@usccb.org