



# The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

The DC Fiscal Policy Institute blog  
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## An Investment in TANF is an Investment in DC's Kids

By Kate Coventry

One in three District children benefit from the welfare-to-work program known as TANF or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Lawmakers often focus on the adults in households getting TANF, but it is important to focus on how these resources boost our city's kids. The District is considering raising the monthly benefit for TANF, and there's good reason to do that.

TANF is designed to meet two broad goals: stabilize families in times of need and help parents to get into jobs that will enable them to make ends meet. The District has made great progress in improving job training, but income assistance has remained flat for the last five years as the cost of living here has skyrocketed.

The current low level of DC's benefits leaves many families in a state of constant crisis. Combining TANF with food stamps brings families to just 58.6 percent of the federal poverty line.<sup>1</sup> This threatens the future success of the District's children. New neuroscience research has found that poor children are more likely to suffer from "toxic stress" that actually disrupts the development of the brain, leading to lifelong negative impacts.<sup>2</sup>

Children in poverty:

- score lower on tests of cognitive skills;
- have more behavior problems;
- are more likely to have a child at a young age;
- are more likely to drop out of high school;
- are less likely to start or graduate from college, if they do graduate; and
- are more likely to be poor as adults.<sup>3</sup>

Under a proposal before the DC Council, TANF benefits would be increased by 15 percent plus a cost-of-living adjustment in the first year and by a cost of living adjustment in future years. A parent with two children, who currently receives just \$428 per month, would see these benefits rise to approximately \$503 per month in the first year.

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<sup>1</sup> Forthcoming publication updating *The Value of TANF Cash Benefits Continued to Erode in 2012* by Ife Finch and Liz Schott, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. March 2013. [www.cbpp.org/files/3-28-13tanf.pdf](http://www.cbpp.org/files/3-28-13tanf.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> *The Long Reach of Early Childhood Poverty: Pathways and Impacts: Q&As with Drs. Greg Duncan, Katherine Magnuson, Tom Boyce and Jack Shonkoff*. Harvard University's Center on Child Development [developingchild.harvard.edu/index.php/download\\_file/view/623/](http://developingchild.harvard.edu/index.php/download_file/view/623/)

<sup>3</sup> *The Foreseeable Harm from Governor Brown's Proposal to Reduce CalWorks Grants for Children* by Michael Herald and Jessica Bartholow. March 2011.

By increasing cash assistance, the District can help reduce these negative effects and ensure a brighter future for DC's kids. An investment in the TANF program is an investment in our city's future.