



The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

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Taking Time to Get the TANF Time Limit Right: A One-year Extension of Assistance to Families Makes Sense

By Ed Lazere

The plan to extend TANF income and employment assistance by one year will keep 6,300 vulnerable families from falling deeper into poverty. It also will give Mayor Bowser and her new human services leadership a year to address a TANF program that has improved in recent years but still faces challenges to serving families well.

Imposing the existing time limit under current circumstances would put children at risk of hardship and raise serious questions of fairness. That's because:

- **TANF employment services are inadequate.** Families wait up to 11 months to get into DC's TANF employment preparation services, with their time clock ticking. In Maryland, the time clock does not run when families do not receive services.
- **DC's time limit fails to recognize the complex lives of many poor families.** Forty-four states recognize that some families need more time to move to self-sufficiency. But DC's rigid time limit has no exceptions. Policies elsewhere reflect that parents who remain on TANF for long periods often suffer from mental health challenges, developmental disabilities or other problems that are difficult to identify. The Department of Human Services recently acknowledged that many TANF recipients "have unexposed or undiagnosed barriers that may prohibit them from engaging in services."

A time limit that is responsive to family circumstances is important to ensuring that TANF helps families take steps toward greater independence, rather than pushing children into deep poverty. Families cut off TANF often are not able to replace lost benefits with employment income, research on state welfare time limits finds, leading to chaotic or unstable lives. Poverty harms children in ways that make it harder to succeed in school and in later life.

The mayor's TANF proposal includes important efforts to better understand the needs of TANF families, which will then inform changes in services and in the time limit policy. It will:

- **Develop a fundamental understanding of long-term TANF participants:** The Department of Human Services will support research on a group of DC's long-term welfare

recipients to better understand their characteristics and needs, and it will conduct thorough assessment of all families once they are within one year of reaching the time limit.

- **Provide new services for families with multiple barriers:** The mayor plans to expand access to employment services in 2016, while taking time to develop new service options for 2017 and beyond, such as closely linking employment and mental health services.
- **Create hardship extensions for families in certain circumstances:** Starting in FY 2017 the District will give extensions to families that meet conditions that warrant a time limit extension.

This plan will allow the District to create a TANF program that balances the goals of providing financial stability to families in need and keeping children out of deep poverty, while also helping parents move to greater independence and economic self-sufficiency.