



*An Affiliate of the  
Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*  
820 First Street NE, Suite 460  
Washington, DC 20002  
(202) 408-1080 Fax (202) 408-8173  
[www.dcfpi.org](http://www.dcfpi.org)

**TESTIMONY OF KATE COVENTRY, POLICY ANALYST  
At the Public Hearing on  
Human Services Agency Performance: Department of Human Services (Part I)  
District of Columbia Committee on Human Services  
March 1, 2012**

Chairman Graham and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Kate Coventry, and I am a policy analyst with the DC Fiscal Policy Institute. DCFPI engages in research and public education on the fiscal and economic health of the District of Columbia, with a particular emphasis on how policies impact low-and-moderate income families.

I am here today to testify on the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) redesign and the Interim Disability Assistance (IDA) program.

**Temporary Assistance for Needy Families**

TANF is the welfare-to-work program for needy families with children. While TANF caseloads have dropped by about one-third since the adoption of welfare reform in the 1990s, TANF still provides monthly support to one in three children in the District. Given the numbers of parents and children involved, an effective TANF program is important to the well-being and future of DC's children and an important component in the city's efforts to reduce unemployment.

Recognizing this importance, the Department of Human Services began rolling out a substantial TANF redesign in late 2011. Rather than the "one-size fits all" nature of DC's TANF services up to this point, this new TANF program uses a one-on-one assessment to identify each parent's barriers to employment and then provide a set of services tailored to these needs. This "universal engagement" approach assumes that every TANF family is able to participate — and should be expected to participate — in activities that help prepare for employment or otherwise improve family functioning.

The promising nature of this approach was confirmed by the pilot program conducted by DHS in spring 2011 with 164 families. The pilot resulted in a ten-fold increase in the share of TANF recipients participating in work activities. This was achieved in just 5 weeks, indicating that parents are willing to participate in activities if they are matched to their actual needs.

But the success of the redesign is at-risk. There is a mismatch between DC's recently adopted time limit policy — which will reduce benefits to as low as \$260 a month for thousands of families in October — and the implementation of the redesign. Given the scale of program changes, DHS needs time to be able to fully implement the redesign. Only a fraction of the 18,000 TANF families have been assessed, the first step in accessing the new services and very few have been referred to a new employment services provider. It is likely that the large majority of families affected by the October benefit cut will not be assessed and referred to a provider before then.

Additionally, DC lacks the reasonable exemptions to time limits most states offer to protect the most vulnerable and allow them the time to deal with serious issues that interfere with their ability to work such as domestic violence, illness, or caring for a family member with a disability. DC currently exempts these individuals from work activity requirements during affected months with the understanding that they are accessing services to deal with these issues. But DC does not disregard these months from the time limit, meaning that parents who are dealing with the biggest issues may have little time to prepare for and train for work once they have addressed these issues.

The “Assistance for Needy Families Time Limit Amendment Act of 2012” you recently introduced will provide reasonable time limit exemptions for vulnerable parents and allow all parents time to take advantage of new employment services. This will ensure that the new TANF program is a success by incentivizing work while protecting our most vulnerable families.

### **Interim Disability Assistance**

DC’s IDA program provides an income of \$270 a month – or about \$9 a day – to residents with disabilities who are applying for federal disability benefits and have no other means of support. In recent years, this program has been unfairly criticized. The modest benefits help individuals meet their most basic needs: groceries, prescription co-pays, bus passes, and toiletries. Without IDA, many residents are forced to rely on more costly emergency services, such as emergency rooms and shelters, thus costing the District more.

If an IDA recipient’s SSI application is approved, the federal government reimburses the District for IDA assistance paid during the application period, thus helping to fund the program. DC’s recovery rate, the percentage of costs funded through this reimbursement, is 40 percent, consistent with the average in other states.

Despite the benefits of IDA for recipients and the federal SSI reimbursement, local funding for IDA has been reduced from \$5.6 million in FY 2008 to just \$1.5 million in the current fiscal year. As a result, only 1,200 residents are able to receive assistance each month compared to 2,900 in previous years. There is often a waiting list for the program, leaving individuals with no means of supporting themselves. Without further investment, it is expected that fewer residents will be able to receive assistance even though the need will remain unchanged.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I’m happy to answer any questions.