



April 3, 2013

Creating Sensible Welfare Time Limit Policies Should be a 2014 Budget Priority

By Kate Coventry

As we have noted, a growing economy allowed Mayor Gray to include a number of [investments in programs](#) across DC government in his fiscal year (FY) 2014 budget. However, one missed opportunity in the budget is the need to better align the District's time limit policy for parents on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) with the policy governing when parents are expected to look for work. Today, a parent with serious personal challenges can receive an exemption from engaging in work preparation activities. But the same family's TANF time clock continues to run, leaving it at risk of steep benefit cuts. That doesn't make sense.

Under longstanding rules, the District doesn't require families to be looking for employment while they are facing serious issues such as domestic violence or the need to care for a seriously ill child. Instead the parent is supposed to focus on accessing services to address these issues. These kinds of work exemptions are part of the TANF programs in nearly every state.

But in DC, each family's 60-month time limit clock continues to run, even though most states stop the clock in these situations. This leaves these parents with little time remaining, once they have gotten past their problem, to prepare for and train for work. The DC Council agreed that these families should receive full benefits and a time limit break by including these protections in the adopted budget for FY 2013. Unfortunately these were put on a contingent revenue list, meaning they would only be funded if additional revenues were identified by December 2012. These revenues were not identified, even though substantial increases in revenues were subsequently identified, so these protections have not been implemented.

The mayor's proposed FY 2014 budget includes a new contingent funding list, items that will be funded if additional revenues are identified. This list includes a \$4 million increase for the District's special TANF program for particularly vulnerable families, known as the Program on Work, Employment, and Responsibility (POWER). It is not clear if this is enough funding to help all the families that the DC Council determined should be eligible for a time limit exemption. Also, because this is on a contingent list, there is no guarantee it will be funded. (Very few items have been funded off such lists in the past two years.)

Without a time limit exemption, many families who have received an exemption from work requirements due to personal challenges will experience a steep cut in assistance in October. A family of three will see their benefits reduced to just \$257 per month.

DCFPI urges the Council to identify the funding needed to put these protections into the budget and to better align the time limit so that it only applies when families are able to prepare for work.