



April 24, 2013

Guest Blog: Time Limit Exemptions Give Young Parents the Time to Prepare for Good Jobs

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When thinking about the District's TANF program, one overlooked fact is that many of the families receiving benefits are headed by a young parent (one who is 24 years of age or younger). Research has consistently found that youth need a different set of services and supports than older adults to succeed, and thus we should not assume that the current TANF time limit policy — which applies to all families regardless of their situation — will fit the needs of young heads of household.

Instead, young parents would be much more likely to succeed if the District created time limit exemptions to allow them to finish job training or education without losing the benefits they need to support themselves and their children.

Service providers who work with young parents in the District see the time extension as a common-sense policy. Lena Heid, Case Manager and Parent Educator at the Latin American Youth Center's (LAYC) transitional living program for young parents says that many young parents are still trying to get on their feet, adjust to new roles as parents and finish school. "If the TANF benefits are not extended youth may have to choose between working full time and going to school" she said. "TANF is the only thing that allows some of our young parents to finish school."

Since young parents are still in the process of transitioning to adulthood while managing the demands of a family, offering them the additional support makes sense. Patricia Santucci, Director of Student Support Services at the LAYC Career Academy says that the added financial assistance will affect youth's choices to continue in education programs versus leaving programs to go to work or stay at home with the kids. "If we are trying to encourage young people to be responsible parents and more productive in the community and care for themselves . . . an extension offered while youth are doing something productive is something that would be helpful" Santucci said.

Another important distinction for young parents is the need for more time to acquire skills and education than many adults. "When older parents fall on hard times, they may have had the time to gain the skills or education, and TANF is temporary assistance" said Lena Heid.

"Young people may not have work experience or even the time to obtain work experience" says Patricia Santucci, "while adults who have kids have had the time to do this. We don't want young people to get to 30 or 40 years old without education or work experience." Santucci said.

“This is a good thing for our parents, that they can receive benefits and work on their education and hopefully in the future ...see higher advancement in a career ... it takes that pressure off of them, instead of thinking, ‘how am I going to survive?’ and then repeating the cycle [of intergenerational poverty].” said Eric Collins, Manager of Residential Programs at Sasha Bruce Youthwork.

Recognizing that young people have different needs than their adult counterparts, the District should align its time limit policy with the needs of young families.

For more information on DCAYA’s work around supporting young parents please visit our policy and advocacy pages at www.dc-aya.org.