



## Long Overdue: An Increase in Income Assistance to Needy Families with Children

By Kate Coventry

Welfare programs are supposed to meet two broad goals: stabilize families in times of need and help/encourage parents to get into jobs that will enable them to make ends meet. The District has been doing a lot in recent years to improve the employment side of its Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, but the income assistance component has been ignored. DC's TANF now provides benefits that are just 26 percent of the poverty line and have been flat for five years, while housing costs across the city have been rising dramatically.

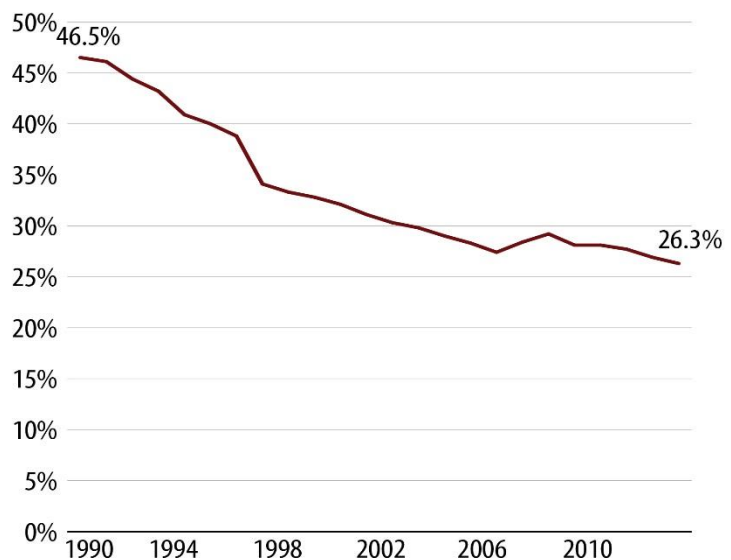
That's why it is great news that the DC Council is now considering legislation to increase benefits for families in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program. The proposed bill, introduced by Councilmembers Graham and Barry, would increase benefits by 15 percent plus a cost-of-living adjustment in the first year and make annual cost-of-living adjustments in subsequent years. A parent with two children, who currently receives \$428 per month, would see these benefits rise to \$492 per month.

The current low level of DC's benefits leaves many families in a state of constant crisis. DC TANF parents [have reported](#) that both their TANF and SNAP (commonly known as food stamps) benefits run out before the end of each month. As a result, families go hungry, face eviction, and sometimes must turn to illegal activities to make it through the month. Most TANF recipients do not get any public help to pay their rent.

The deep poverty that TANF families experience threatens the success of the District's welfare-to-work effort. DC has invested a great deal of time and energy to improve employment services for TANF parents, as we have [previously reported](#) in the District's Dime. But it is very difficult for

Figure 1

### TANF Benefits Are Now Only 26 Percent of the Federal Poverty Line



parents to focus fully on job preparation activities if they are worried about how to meet their kids' most basic needs. Many families who cannot afford their own apartments end up "couch surfing," moving frequently among family and friends, which makes things like regular attendance at school and job training much more challenging.

Even with the proposed increase, the District will trail behind other jurisdictions that also have high costs-of-living. The maximum benefit for a family of three is \$618 in Boston, \$638 in Los Angeles, and \$753 in New York City. Maryland has a maximum monthly benefit of \$576 for a family of three.

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Cost-of-Living Adjustment Amendment Act of 2013 is the first step in ensuring that DC families are able to meet their basic needs while preparing for and finding employment.