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DC Needs to Do More to Help Unemployed Parents

By Kate Coventry

With so many parents struggling to support their families, Mayor Bowser and the DC Council need to do more to help them get good jobs -- and to help them get by until they find employment.

An important tool for accomplishing this is Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the nationwide welfare-to-work program. DC must do more to assist families that have suffered unemployment the longest and are scheduled to be cut off from assistance later this year because of TANF time limits. Other steps DC needs to take include special job placement and support services so these parents can get jobs and succeed at work. Without this, thousands of children could fall deeper into poverty with little hope that their parents will find good jobs. Finally, the District needs to increase the level of financial assistance under TANF for all families so they can pay for such basics as housing and clothes.

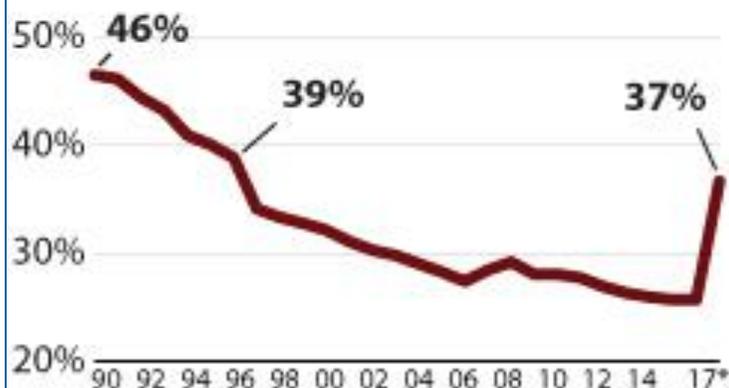
Even if they can't find work, more than 6,000 parents are slated to be cut off from TANF in October, because they have received TANF for more than 60 months. They will lose cash assistance and important services, worsening the big challenges that already make it difficult to get jobs, like low literacy skills or disabilities. Many others will struggle to find a job despite their best efforts simply because [unemployment remains high](#) in the District among workers with less than a bachelor's degree.

DC should do what most states do: allow some families to keep receiving TANF after they reach the time limit. It makes sense to prevent them from falling farther behind. Additionally, DC should implement services other states have found help families secure employment. This

TANF Benefits Now Only 26 Percent of the Federal Poverty Line, Set to Rise to 37 Percent in FY 2017

TANF Benefits as a Percentage of Poverty Line (1990-2017)

TANF Benefits and Poverty Line Based on a Family of Three



Source: 2014 Poverty line from <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/14poverty.cfm>
*Uses a 2.4% inflator for 2015-2017 poverty line and benefit level (inflator used by DC Office of Chief Financial Officer for benefit levels)

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includes specialized “vocational rehabilitation” assessments to identify disabilities and helping individuals figure out how to cope with them at work. For example, some people have disabilities that make it difficult to remember verbal instructions. Vocational rehabilitation counselors can help negotiate with employers for such accommodations such as being allowed to tape-record instructions.

As things now stand, the level of TANF cash assistance is set to rise in October 2016. That needs to happen, which means it is important for Mayor Bowser and the DC Council to resist any temptation to use for other purposes the money set aside for this. The current low level of DC’s benefits, just \$434 a month for a family of three, leaves many TANF families struggling to pay for basics like rent and clothing. DC’s TANF benefits equal just 26 percent of the federal poverty line of \$19,790 a year. As the graphic shows, the buying power of TANF assistance has fallen because TANF hasn’t kept up with inflation and rising housing costs. The scheduled increase to about \$650 a month for a family of three would be in line with other high-cost areas of the country.

Economic recovery in DC has been uneven, and many are still left behind. Helping families stay afloat until parents find work will ensure a brighter future.

To read the full copy of DCFPI’s TANF transition brief, click [here](#).