



The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

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Too Many DC Families Live on \$2 a Day: It's Time to Do More to Help Families Thrive

By Ed Lazere

Hard as it is to picture, a growing number of DC families have to live on less than \$2 a day, and decisions by Mayor Bowser and the DC Council will help determine whether this problem gets worse over the next year -- or better.

Recent cuts in income assistance mean that 13,000 DC children are in families with incomes this low, and a pending time limit in DC's TANF welfare-to-work program could reduce families' incomes even further starting next year.

This means making DC's TANF time limit more responsive to family needs critical to the wellbeing of families and children. This year, Mayor Bowser and the DC Council chose to delay any cutoff of assistance until October 2016, to give time to refine DC's TANF program and time limit. Those changes will determine whether more families get the help and protections they need or, on the flip side, whether more families fall into deep poverty, with severe consequences for family stability and the ability of children to develop healthfully.

A new book details the harmful impact of restrictive time limits on families facing limited job opportunities. The book, [*\\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*](#), found that the number of U.S. families with extremely low incomes doubled over the past 20 years. That partly reflects state TANF time limits that have weakened protections for families. In some states, fewer than one in 10 poor families gets any cash assistance today. It also reflects an economy where the best option for workers without advanced skills is a low-wage job with uneven hours that make planning family life and paying for necessities difficult.

In DC, the issue of time limits stems from legislation adopted in 2010 and 2011, which reduced cash assistance benefits for families who have received TANF benefits for more than 60 months. Those benefits now equal \$152 a month for a family of three -- about \$1.70 per day per person. Under the law, families that reach 60 months will lose all cash assistance in October 2016.

Yet little is known about why so many DC families are not succeeding in the job market, and are instead opting for such a small TANF benefit. [Research](#) from other communities suggests that families who stay on cash assistance the longest tend to have problems with mental health or physical limitations, cognitive impairments, or responsibility for families members with disabilities.

These barriers have been identified among DC families as well, though from [research](#) that is more than 10 years old.

Fortunately, the Bowser administration has committed to modifying TANF services and the time limit over the next year to better serve families. This will include more research on challenges facing TANF families, expanded employment services, new services aimed at families with deeper challenges, and a set of criteria for extending benefits beyond the time limit when needed.

Those are positive steps, and the details will be important. There is reason to believe that policymakers and DC residents will support the idea of a welfare program that helps families gain the skills needed to succeed and protects children from harm. The best way to redesigning TANF services and modifying the TANF time limit to meet these goals will involve extensive consultation with TANF families, experts, and advocates.