



The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

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Cutting TANF Would Increase Family Homelessness

By Kate Coventry

DC is experiencing a tremendous homelessness crisis, with more than 1,100 families in emergency shelter.¹ The city is actively working to address this crisis by allowing families into shelter year round when they need, rather than just during hypothermia season, and by identifying replacement shelter sites for the dilapidated DC General. But this crisis will only get worse if 6,500 families are cut off of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) with no benefits in October, as will happen under current law. Because homelessness has profound negative effects on children, as well as huge costs to DC's budget, the Mayor and Council should reform DC's rigid TANF time limit to ensure families have the support they need to avoid becoming homeless.



More families than ever are experiencing homelessness in the District, in part because DC has lost a tremendous amount of affordable housing. [The number of apartments renting for less than \\$800 a month fell from almost 60,000 in 2002 to 33,000 in 2013.](#) In the face of rising housing costs, incomes have remained flat for most low-income households and the value of TANF benefits has fallen.

The effects of DC's time limit are already being felt in the homeless services system. Half of the families in Rapid Re-Housing, our key tool for getting families out of shelter and on their feet, have been on TANF for more than 60 months and are set to be cut off in October. The goal of Rapid Re-Housing is to get families to the point where they can pay rent on their own. That goal will be undermined if families lose all cash assistance before they are ready.

Yet that is precisely what will happen unless DC's TANF time limit is modified. More than 6,500 families are set to lose all TANF benefits in October, and only one-third live in affordable housing that they can keep if they have no income. Most of the families without housing assistance are doubled up, staying with family members or friends and contributing what they can to household expenses. If time-limited families are cut off entirely and have no income to contribute to household expenses, many will be asked to move out with no other options than family shelter.

With no income, it will be very difficult for these families to move out of shelter which is bad for family well-being and bad for DC's budget. Emergency shelter costs about \$150 per night. And helping a family exit from homeless can cost upwards of \$50,000, based on the average length of stay in shelter and the cost of DC's Rapid Re-Housing Program.

¹ Emergency Shelter Nightly Census 3/10/2016. The Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness.

Together, the Mayor and Council can reform the time limit to prevent an increase in family homelessness that neither families nor the District can afford.

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