



**TESTIMONY OF KATE COVENTRY, POLICY ANALYST  
DC FISCAL POLICY INSTITUTE**

**At the Fiscal Year 2017 Budget Oversight Hearing  
For the Department of Human Services  
District of Columbia Committee on Health and Human Services  
April 20, 2016**

Chairwoman Alexander and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Kate Coventry, and I am a policy analyst with the DC Fiscal Policy Institute. DCFPI engages in research and public education on the fiscal and economic health of the District of Columbia, with a particular emphasis on how policies impact low-and-moderate income families.

I am here today to encourage the Council to take steps this budget season to address a troubled TANF program that has not served families well and a rigid time limit that puts many vulnerable families at risk.

The proposed fiscal year (FY) 2017 budget extends benefits and employment assistance for one year to 6,200 families who otherwise faced the loss of TANF cash benefits and services in October 2016. While this protects families from being cut off for one year, it does not make any progress to reform policies that already have left families with incredibly low benefits, and it does not fix a rigid time limit policy that puts vulnerable families in dire circumstances at risk of losing all assistance.

- Under the proposed budget, families who have received assistance for 60 months or more will receive just \$154 a month for a family of three in FY 2017. This reflects benefit cuts due to time limits that have been implemented since 2011. Given that most TANF families do not receive housing assistance, this is far too low for families to make ends meet.
- Under the proposed budget, all families who have received assistance for more than 60 months will lose both cash assistance and employment services in October 2017, regardless of their circumstances, with no opportunity to receive assistance again.

Getting the TANF time limit right – modifying it to ensure that it provides stability to families and children who need it the most – is important to child well-being and to the success of other mayoral initiatives, such as ending homelessness. Nearly 300 families in DC’s Rapid Re-Housing program, which helps families exit shelter, have received TANF for 52 months or more, putting them at risk of going over the cliff. Losing their entire income source would make it incredibly hard to successfully exit homelessness.

DC’s time limit is one of the strictest in the nation, cutting off all families regardless of their circumstances, with no chance to ever receive assistance again. The District’s time limit even cuts off families when they are doing everything expected of them to look for work.

In contrast with DC, most states have used flexibility under federal TANF law to create time limit extensions for families who need more time.

- **Extensions:** Forty-four states have extensions that give parents more time to deal with issues like domestic violence or caring for a family member with a disability. The District's time limit does not offer extensions under any circumstance.
- **Continued assistance after the time limit:** Six states have other time limit policies to protect families. New York has a separate state cash assistance program that continues to provide benefits to families. California, Indiana, Maryland, and Oregon remove the parent from the TANF case but allow children to continue to receive benefits. Vermont allows families participating in work activities to continue to receive benefits, and in practice almost all families have continued to receive assistance. The District's time limit does not provide any cash assistance or employment assistance after the time limit.

The District's rigid time limit is of concern because a large body of research confirms that families reaching time limits often have substantial problems, including high rates of mental illness, domestic violence, and disabilities. Research from other states finds that the vast majority of families cut off TANF are not able to replace lost benefits with employment income, leaving many to lead chaotic and unstable lives. This leads to increases in homelessness and child neglect as families cannot meet their children's most basic needs.

- **Most do not secure steady employment:** A Maryland Study found that families who left TANF because of time limits work in fewer quarters in the year after leaving TANF than other TANF leavers do.<sup>1</sup> In Washington, only 45 percent were working three years after their case closed due to a time limit.<sup>2</sup>
- **Many experience housing instability or homelessness:** A Maine study found that 1 in 5 families reported being evicted; having to relocate, often to overcrowded living conditions; or needing to go to a homeless shelter.<sup>3</sup> Washington State found that families who left due to time limits had the highest rates of homelessness – 20 percent were homeless at the end of the three-year follow-up; this was a full six percentage points higher than families who were on TANF for more than a year but left on their own.<sup>4</sup>
- **Parents struggle to keep their families together:** When parents are cut off of TANF without a secure job, their children are more likely to be abused or neglected and end up in foster care.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Hetling, Andrea, Kathryn Patterson, and Catherine Born (2006). *The TANF Time Limit: Comparing Long-Term and Other Welfare Leavers*, Family Welfare Research and Training Group, University of Maryland.

<sup>2</sup> Patton, Deleena, Melissa Ford Shah, Barbara E.M. Felver, Kathryn Beall (2015). *TANF Caseload Decline: The Well-Being of Parents and Children Leaving WorkFirst in Washington State*, Report to the DSHS Economic Services Administration, Office of the Assistant Secretary and the Community Services Division. <https://www.dshs.wa.gov/node/10898/>

<sup>3</sup> Butler, Sandra (2013). Time Limits and Maine Families: Consequences of Withdrawing the Safety Net. University of Maine. <http://www.mejp.org/sites/default/files/TANF-Study-SButler-Feb2013.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Patton, Deleena, Melissa Ford Shah, Barbara E.M. Felver, Kathryn Beall (2015).

<sup>5</sup> Nam, Y., Meezan, W., & Danziger, S. (2006). Welfare recipient's involvement with child protective services after welfare reform. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 30(11), 1181-1199.

Shook Slack, K., Lee, B. J., & Berger, L. M. (2007). Do welfare sanctions increase child protection system involvement? A cautious answer. *Social Service Review*, 81(2), 207-228.

- **Child development is threatened:** When TANF benefits are cut off from mothers of preschoolers, their children are three times more likely to have serious behavior problems than other young children.<sup>6</sup> Children are also more likely to repeat a grade and less likely to be engaged by their parents in important learning activities like reading when they are subject to strict TANF time limits.<sup>7</sup>

Legislation to reform DC's TANF time limit was introduced in the DC Council in 2015. While that bill, the Public Assistance Amendment Act of 2015, has not been adopted, it could form the basis for time limit reforms. The bill would create extensions that would allow families to receive assistance after the time limit, with extension eligibility reviewed periodically. The legislation also would continue assistance to children when a family reaches a time limit without qualifying for an extension.

DCFPI urges the Council to take steps this budget season to adopt time limit reforms and fund as many of these reforms as possible. This will ensure that at least some vulnerable families will be restored to the full benefit level and put the District on a path to adopt the full policy in FY 2018.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I am happy to take any questions.

---

Beimers, D., & Coulton, C. J. (2011). Do employment and type of exit influence child maltreatment among families leaving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families? *Children and Youth Services Review, 33*, 1112-1119.

<sup>6</sup> Lohman, B. J., Pittman, L. D., Coley, R. L., & Chase-Lansdale, P. L. (2004). Welfare history, sanctions, and developmental outcomes among low-income children and youth. *Social Service Review, 78*(1), 41-73.

<sup>7</sup> Wang, J.S. (2015). TANF coverage, state TANF requirement stringencies, and child well-being. *Children and Youth Services Review, 53*, 121-129.