

STRENGTHEN TANF AS A LIFELINE: IMPLEMENT FIXES TO HELP FAMILIES IN EXTREME POVERTY MEET THEIR BASIC NEEDS HB3129

REPRESENTATIVE MARY FLOWERS • SENATOR MATTIE HUNTER

The **Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)** program provides monthly grants to needy children and their families. The grant helps families meet their basic needs, including rent, utilities, clothing, personal hygiene products, diapers, transportation, etc. Unfortunately, eligible families are often unfairly sanctioned leaving them at risk of severe hardship.

WHAT ARE TANF SANCTIONS?

- ▶ A sanction is a suspension of a TANF grant when an adult does not meet certain participation requirements. Sanctions occur at epidemic rates in TANF. They are often imposed erroneously or for minor violations. Sanctions can last for several months and it can take IDHS several weeks or months to restore a family's grant.
- ▶ Almost half of sanctioned families on TANF report experiencing one or more of the following four hardships:
 - + maternal or child hunger;
 - + eviction or homelessness;
 - + utility shutoff;
 - + unable to receive medical care due to cost.¹
- ▶ A study of TANF caregivers seeking emergency room treatment for a child found that sanctioned families are 30% more likely to have been previously hospitalized, 50% more likely to experience food insecurity, and are 90% more likely to have been admitted to the hospital at an ER visit than non-sanctioned families.²

“When I was sanctioned, I remember immediately feeling overwhelming distress. ‘How am I going to provide food or diapers for my kids this month?’ I ended up visiting every food bank I could...I felt embarrassed and at my lowest having to beg for help. I ended up going to a church hopelessly trying to get food for my kids who hadn't eaten all day.”

SOLUTION

In an assistance program for Illinois' neediest families, sanctions should be rare and fair.

- ▶ Follow the lead of Washington, D.C., California, Maine, and New York and carve out a child-only portion of the TANF grant as belonging to the child(ren), and when necessary sanction the parent's portion. Designates 75% of a family's TANF benefit as the child(ren) portion that cannot be cut for any reason. When sanctioning, the remaining 25% is considered the parent's portion and is subject to sanction. Thirty percent of the parent's portion can be reduced if a parent is not complying with TANF participation requirements.
- ▶ Create Good Cause exemptions for families who are experiencing homelessness, eviction or utility disruption. Good Cause exemptions are given to families when the adult can demonstrate that there are mitigating reasons for not meeting participant requirements.
- ▶ Ensure that the TANF grant amount remains at 30% of the Federal Poverty Level.

¹ Reichmann, Nancy, et al (2005). "TANF Sanctioning and Hardship." Social Services Review 215-236.

² Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program (2002). "The Impact of Welfare Sanctions on the Health of Infants and Toddlers." http://www.childrenshealthwatch.org/upload/resource/welfare_7_02.pdf



NIYA KELLY

Chicago Coalition for the Homeless

niya@chicagohomeless.org

(312) 641-4140

NOLAN DOWNEY

Sargent Shriver Center on Poverty Law

nolandowney@povertylaw.org

(312) 854-3375

KIMBERLY DREW

Heartland Alliance

kdrew@heartlandalliance.org

(773) 209-6015

FOR MORE
INFORMATION