

Strengthen TANF as a Lifeline:

Implement fixes to help low-income kids and families meet basic needs

> *Children should never live in a household without income.*

All children deserve to live in households where their basic needs are met, and parents should never have to worry about providing necessities for their children. Especially during times of hardship or crisis, all families should have access to a baseline level of stability and economic security.

In Washington state, our **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)/WorkFirst program** is designed to protect low-income families with dependent children from the harm of deep poverty and support their transition to stability.

> *Families who struggle most are least likely to access TANF/WorkFirst.*

However, over the last decade Washington state has **implemented harsh sanction and time limit policies** that have cut TANF/WorkFirst in ways that have exacerbated extreme hardship and left families without access to income. This depletion of financial resources has exacerbated our state's homelessness and mental health crises.

- **More than 1 in 3 families** removed due to time limits and sanctions in 2018 **face homelessness.** [1]
- Since 2015, **7 out of 10** parents/caregivers removed due to time limits have **mental health needs.**
- **2 in 5** have a need for **substance use disorder** treatment. [2]

> *Simple fixes to TANF/WorkFirst can ensure kids and families meet their basic needs.*

TANF/WorkFirst policies should not penalize families when they're not able to meet program requirements because of extreme hardship. Instead, TANF/WorkFirst should provide common-sense opportunities for struggling families to overcome barriers and get back on track.

A strong TANF/WorkFirst program helps families:

- ✓ **Pay rent, afford transportation,** purchase diapers, and other essential needs
- ✓ **Access child care and supportive services** like mental health and substance use treatment
- ✓ Connect with **education and job training opportunities**



> *We need legislation that would help strengthen TANF/WorkFirst by:*

- **Easing harsh sanctions** so parents can successfully return to compliance. This fix will keep children from being completely cut off from cash assistance if their parent does not meet program requirements.
- **Allowing common-sense extensions to the time-limit** when parents are meeting program requirements, including extensions for families experiencing mental health challenges and employment barriers.
- **Integrating the mandatory orientation** into a recipient's comprehensive evaluation in order to ensure that families are not denied benefits because they were unable to attend an orientation session.

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I was sanctioned after missing several DSHS appointments because I was in a domestic violence relationship and my partner wouldn't let me leave our house.

When I got the news that I'd been sanctioned, I remember immediately feeling overwhelming distress. 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.

-Mother and TANF/WorkFirst recipient, Everett

Sources: [1] Budget & Policy Center analysis of DSHS data on TANF/WorkFirst recipient households terminated for reaching 60-month time limit and/or due to non-compliance sanctions, SFY 2018. Homeless includes people who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, or are living in emergency or domestic violence shelter, or couch surfing.

[2] Budget & Policy Center analysis of DSHS data on head of household TANF/WorkFirst recipients terminated for reaching 60-month time limit. Figure is a 3-year average of SFY 2015, 2016, and 2017 data. In SFY 2017 alone, 74% of head of household TANF/WorkFirst recipients removed due to time limits had mental health needs. Mental health need includes people who in the 24 months prior to case closure had a diagnosis of mental illness, filled a prescription for an antipsychotic, antimania, antidepressant, antianxiety, or ADHD medication, or received mental health or behavioral health rehabilitation services.