



## **Mending the Safety Net - Executive Summary**

Twenty years ago, “welfare reform” overhauled the nation’s cash assistance program for needy families with children. In ending the entitlement to benefits and creating the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant, Congress created very strong incentives for states to reduce their caseloads. No longer could struggling families count on a national safety net to ensure that their children have diapers, heat, and shelter. Pennsylvania’s most destitute families need the TANF program to protect them from homelessness and instability, and to help them get good jobs to escape poverty. But Pennsylvania’s program helps too few families, with too meager benefits that are too difficult to get.

Since early 2015, the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (DHS) has made dramatic improvements to the Commonwealth’s safety net for low income families by strengthening its Medicaid and SNAP (formerly food stamp) programs. DHS should be applauded for taking these important steps to improve access to SNAP and Medicaid. **Now, DHS should take similar, much needed steps to improve access to cash assistance through the TANF program.** Twenty years of harmful policies and administrative barriers to TANF have made it increasingly difficult for pregnant women and families living in deep poverty in Pennsylvania to access the income supports that they need while they stabilize their lives. The number of families on TANF has declined significantly in Pennsylvania over the last twenty years, from 487,000 adults and children in 1996 to 158,000 in June of this year. This decline should not be celebrated: based on an analysis of available data from DHS, Community Legal Services (CLS) is disturbed to conclude on behalf of its clients that the caseload decline cannot be attributed to successfully moving poor parents into the workforce.

Instead, many vulnerable families are unable to access the program, or are leaving TANF due to overzealous sanctions or bureaucratic roadblocks. They are falling deeper into extreme poverty because of harmful outdated policies that have not been addressed. **For every 100 poor families in Pennsylvania, only 31 families receive cash assistance from TANF.** In 2014, at least **35,000 Pennsylvania families with children receiving SNAP were poor enough to qualify for TANF, but did not receive it.** These families may be homeless, dependent on help from family or friends, and desperately trying to get by, and TANF could make the difference.

The TANF program in Pennsylvania is not serving families in deep poverty as it should, but the program is not irreparably broken – it can be fixed. CLS recommends four steps to fix Pennsylvania’s safety net:

1. DHS should make it easier for the most vulnerable families to connect with the TANF program by simplifying program rules for families facing homelessness, physical or behavioral health problems, or sexual assault or domestic violence, while eliminating needless “red tape” for all families.



2. DHS and the General Assembly should work in partnership to modify financial eligibility rules and grant amounts for the first time in decades, to make TANF a more viable financial resource for pregnant women and families.
3. DHS should reinvigorate its TANF employment and training programs, to allow families to move more quickly toward self-sufficiency.
4. DHS should commission a new study of TANF leavers, to understand better what happens to families who no longer receive TANF, and to assist in identifying further policy solutions.

By taking these four steps, DHS and the General Assembly will ensure that the TANF program can fulfill its mission of providing a “hand up” to Pennsylvania’s families living in deep poverty.

To view the full report, please visit [www.clsphila.org/MendingTheSafetyNet](http://www.clsphila.org/MendingTheSafetyNet).

Please also sign onto letters to Governor Wolf in support of the TANF program. There are letters for organizations and individuals to sign onto. Letters are at [www.papovertycoalition.org](http://www.papovertycoalition.org).

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