

NO CHILD SHOULD LIVE IN DEEP POVERTY

Strengthen TANF for Pennsylvania Families and for Racial Justice

INVEST IN FAMILIES, INCREASE TANF

It's time to reverse decades of disinvestment in Pennsylvania's poorest families. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has brought renewed attention to racial inequities and disparities in income and health, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a critical program for vulnerable families, has not increased benefits since 1990. This lack of action has led Pennsylvania families to suffer from economic instability, forcing them to make impossible choices between buying diapers or keeping the lights on.

We propose a gradual, inflation-indexed increase in TANF benefits so that no child in our state lives in deep poverty at less than 50% of the federal poverty line. We also propose immediate relief during the pandemic by using TANF federal block grant funds to assist families through special allowances for essential items such as diapers, housing costs, and clothing.

Mr. W.'s daughter struggles with substance use disorder, and she cannot care for her child. Mr. W. has raised his grandson since he was a baby, and he receives TANF to support the child. With TANF benefits so low, Mr. W. fears losing his grandson to the child welfare system if he cannot afford to take care of him.

TANF BENEFITS ARE TOO LOW

Pennsylvania has not increased TANF benefits since 1990. Currently, a family of three receives just \$403 in total monthly TANF benefits, issued in two increments of \$201.50. **This leaves a three-person family with an annual income of just \$4,836; only 22% of the federal poverty level.**

Pennsylvania has fallen far behind. **TANF benefits have lost more than 50% of their buying power since 1990 due to inflation**, and participation in Pennsylvania has decreased by 84%. This is not because fewer children are living in poverty; there has been no substantial decrease in child poverty levels. Instead, the minimal value of benefits and the burdensome requirements for parents have shut out families in need. Currently, fewer than 81,000 adults and children receive TANF benefits in Pennsylvania.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is a federally-funded block grant that provides cash assistance to the poorest Pennsylvania families. Parents are required to actively look for work or participate in a job training program.

TANF additionally provides support for children under 18 being cared for by grandparents or other relatives, and for survivors of domestic violence and their children while they escape abuse and rebuild their lives.

TANF is a critical program. Families spend TANF benefits in local communities and businesses on basic needs such as housing, clothing, transportation and toiletries like toothpaste and soap. TANF can help mitigate the effects of the pandemic on Pennsylvania's most vulnerable families.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The General Assembly should increase the grant amount incrementally until it reaches 50% of the federal poverty level.
2. The General Assembly should ensure that benefit levels increase with inflation.
3. Governor Wolf's administration should offer special allowances for TANF families for essential items that have become more expensive and difficult to get during the pandemic, such as diapers and food.

Just in the past year, fourteen states and the District of Columbia have increased TANF benefit amounts: California, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Ohio, South Carolina, Texas, Vermont, Virginia and Wyoming. Seven states have provided additional allowances to TANF families during the pandemic: Alabama, Illinois, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Vermont, and West Virginia. It is time for our state to join in this momentum.

Pennsylvania must offer families the opportunity to thrive during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond. Economic security programs like TANF are powerful and proven anti-poverty tools that give families flexible income support in moments of need. Children in families benefiting from programs like TANF do better in school and have increased earning power in adulthood. Moreover, adequate benefits allow parents to spend more of their time focusing on getting sustainable jobs.

Ms. A. lost her job due to domestic violence. Soon, she and her child lost their health insurance, faced eviction, and did not have enough food. With the help of Community Legal Services, Ms. A applied for TANF, food stamps, and Medicaid. The assistance is not enough to pay her rent and bills. Ms. A. told CLS that an increase in TANF would assist her greatly until she is able to gain employment to support her family.

TANF IS AN EQUITY ISSUE

Racist policies and practices and historic disinvestment in Black communities have led to wide economic disparities. More than half of PA TANF participants are Black, while only 12% of the state population identifies as Black.

Poverty during childhood has lasting consequences for health, developmental and educational outcomes. While 17% of Pennsylvania children live in poverty, Black and Brown children are disproportionately impacted, with more than 1 in 3 Black and Latinx children living in poverty.

The pandemic has deepened longstanding inequity. Black and Latinx families are bearing the brunt of the health and economic consequences of the pandemic. An October 2020 national survey shows that half of Black women with children are struggling to pay for necessities like rent and utilities. Job losses during the pandemic have hit Latinx workers harder than any other group.

The Meet the Need Campaign is a statewide coalition of advocates, community groups and TANF parents led by the Black Women's Policy Agenda, Community Legal Services of Philadelphia, Just Harvest, and Pennsylvania Health Access Network.

