



Advocacy Alert

OREGON FOOD BANK
OREGON HUNGER RELIEF TASK FORCE

October 2001
Volume 7 Issue 11



take five

(actions that take five minutes or less)

Action: Call or write your state legislators to update them on how your community is doing during this economic slowdown. If you are a service provider, now is a good time to invite legislators to visit and hear from the people you serve.

Background: The state budget situation is not good because of shrinking revenues. An emergency legislative session is a possibility if things don't improve. This could potentially mean cuts to human services. Educate your legislators!

Legislative Yellow Pages

State Legislative Information
(503) 986-1000
www.leg.state.or.us/findlegsltr/findset.htm

Governor Kitzhaber
(503) 378-3111

U.S. Capitol Switchboard
(202) 224-3121

President Bush/White House
(202) 456-1414

Federal Legislative Contacts
Rep. Wu (District 1)
(503) 326-2901
Rep. Walden (District 2)
(541) 776-4646
Rep. Blumenauer (District 3)
(503) 231-2300
Rep. DeFazio (District 4)
(541) 465-6732
Rep. Hooley (District 5)
(503) 588-9100
Senator Smith
(503) 326-3386
Senator Wyden
(503) 326-7525

TANF Reauthorization: From caseload reduction to poverty reduction

The nation's welfare program, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), is up for reauthorization in 2002. Prior to the events of September 11th, TANF reauthorization was on the fast track for this year in Congress. Assuming the process will slow down as the nation deals with international events, it is critical to learn about TANF reauthorization and how it can impact poverty in this country.

The following are excerpts from the National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support's report, "From Caseload Reduction to Poverty Reduction: A Fresh Vision for TANF Reauthorization," by Deepak Bhargava, Peter Edelman, Cindy Mann and Charlene Sinclair (August 2001). For a copy of the full report, go to: www.nationalcampaign.org.

Washington, D.C., is getting ready for a new round in the welfare wars. August 22, 2001, is the fifth anniversary of the signing of the landmark federal welfare law, which replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant. Federal authorization for the TANF block grant expires in 2002, and Congress must take some action to renew the block grant next year. It is therefore a particularly appropriate time

to reflect on the record since 1996, and on what should come next.

TANF raised questions about work, family and immigration but didn't provide the answers – and the questions are becoming more urgent as the economy cools down. TANF reauthorization provides a historic opportunity to pivot out of tired paradigms, look at the world afresh, and develop creative solutions to old problems.

The debate over TANF reauthorization should be grounded in the recognition of four fundamental realities:

Caseloads are down, but poverty persists

For the very poorest families and children and immigrants – the only demographic groups in America to lose ground over the last five mostly prosperous years – life is actually worse. Low-wage workers live in poverty and lack job security, health care, and opportunities to improve their skills to get better jobs. These workers often lack the safety net of Unemployment Insurance that other Americans rely on, making them uniquely vulnerable to job loss and recession.

TANF provides no relief to most low-income families

TANF is becoming irrelevant to most poor families. Families are typically denied help in one of three ways: families are ineligible for help under state policy; eligible but diverted or pushed off assistance; or given inadequate

assistance, typically under demeaning conditions.

Work/family stress is a defining feature of the new economy

Low-wage jobs aren't family friendly: they typically do not provide time off to care for family members, whether through sick, vacation, or parental leave. Transportation gaps leave low-income parents traveling hours to child care, to work, and back again. High quality, affordable child care is a struggle for all families but particularly for parents living in poor communities. Low-income parents often face untenable choices between their jobs and income and their children's well-being.

Immigrants are an increasing share of the low-wage workforce

Our economy relies heavily on the labor and taxes of immigrants, who comprise a growing share of the low-wage workforce. If we are serious about designing a system that deals with the failures of the low-wage labor market, there is no sound basis for denying help to parents based on where they were born.

The four realities described above add up to a sobering portrait of the low-wage labor market and of welfare reform. In short, *TANF is to poverty what a fork is to soup: it makes things messier and leaves you hungry.* Persistent poverty for families and chil-

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Food stamp reauthorization

Prior to September 11th, the reauthorization of the Food Stamp Program was on a fast track in Congress as part of the House Agriculture Committee's Farm Bill. In late July the bill was passed out of committee with \$3.3 billion over ten years earmarked for food stamp improvements, far less than advocates had hoped for. The proposed changes are positive, yet incremental, including benefit improvements and quality control reforms. For more information about the Farm Bill and food stamp reauthorization, see the Western Region Anti-Hunger Consortium website: www.wrahc.org.

The timing of the House floor vote is unknown as we go to print. The Senate Agriculture Committee is continuing with their work on a Senate Farm Bill. It is unclear whether the Committee will put together a ten-year package like the House version, given the disappearing budget surplus. National advocates continue to assert that **any** Farm Bill must contain a nutrition title and funding for Food Stamp Program improvements.

The Advocacy Alert is published jointly by the Oregon Food Bank (OFB) and the Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force (OHRTF).

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TANF and poverty reduction *continued from page 1*

dren was and remains a national disgrace.

We know how to help families lift themselves out of poverty. Income to supplement low-wages, education and training, and other supports offer the clearest path to long-term family and child well-being. When work isn't there or isn't possible – because of family responsibilities, personal crises or a slowing economy – reliable and dignified support to families is a moral and social imperative.

We should not and we cannot go back to AFDC. But TANF as currently constituted cannot solve the problems facing us. Therefore, we must ask ourselves: what is a compelling vision for TANF reauthorization that accords with broadly shared values, builds on ideas bubbling up from the grassroots, and can be accomplished?

New vision, new priorities

It's time for real change – time to give voice to a new vision and to facilitate low-income people's opportunity

A quick look at TANF in Oregon

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or "welfare," provides a monthly cash grant to low-income families with minor children. The 1996 federal welfare reform law gave states the flexibility to design their welfare programs according to the needs of their state. Two years earlier, Oregon received a block grant via a waiver to implement its own reforms.

The TANF caseload in Oregon has dropped nearly 60 percent over the past six years. From July 1995 to July of this year, the number of families on TANF fell from about 38,000 to about 16,000. Despite this caseload drop

to shape that vision and have their voices heard.

The platform of the National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support is consistent with widely held values and is based on the following principles:

Income support and education and training should be more widely available to low-income families. Two-parent families as well as single-parent families should qualify for TANF. The federal limits that discourage education and training should be dropped. Discrimination based on where a person was born should be ended.

Families and the government should each be responsible. People who are receiving TANF are by definition playing by the rules (or they would be sanctioned), but the level of aid consigns them to abject poverty. At a minimum, states should be required to measure and report on the sufficiency of their TANF cash assistance grant levels against a fair standard.

The well-being of families matters most. Parents with

sick, disabled, or very young children, or infirm relatives face competing demands that must be accommodated. TANF rules should be structured to reduce or eliminate work participation requirements and suspend time limits for these parents. State performance under TANF should not be measured by caseload reduction or by meeting arbitrary process standards like work participation rates. Instead, state performance should be measured against outcomes, including reduction of family and child poverty.

The culture of the welfare office must not make it difficult and degrading to seek income support and education and training, and must instead make it possible for families to live decent lives. Federal and state resources will need to be sufficient to meet the scale of the need. And low-income people and their allies will need to articulate a bold new vision for poverty reduction and create the public will to make the needed changes happen.

ment Program is the first step for all TANF applicants. This is a 45-day assessment and job-search period applicants are required to complete before receiving TANF.

Advocates are working to increase supports for working families who are not eligible for TANF but who need temporary assistance to remain financially stable. Also, in Oregon, attending college is not a permitted work activity, thus clients cannot pursue a two-year or four-year degree and still get benefits. A legislative goal is to establish a Parents as Scholars program, a TANF-funded student aid program to help low-income parents get a college degree.

and a strong economy, poverty has not necessarily decreased. In 1996-1998, the poverty rate among working families with children was 15.2 percent, up from 9.7 percent ten years earlier.

The maximum cash payment for a family of three is \$503/month. Combined with Food Stamps, this equals about 72 percent of the federal poverty level. The income level for TANF is about 50 percent of poverty. Oregon's benefit levels have not been raised since 1991.

Oregon's guiding principal is "work first," which means the goal is employment as soon as possible. The Assess-