

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 21, 2011

The Honorable Geoff Davis
Chairman
House Committee on Ways and Means
Subcommittee on Human Resources
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Lloyd Doggett
Ranking Member
House Committee on Ways and Means
Subcommittee on Human Resources
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Davis and Ranking Member Doggett:

We commend the Subcommittee on Human Resources of the Committee on Ways and Means for taking up the important task of extending (or reauthorizing) Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Fatherhood and Healthy Families programs. As you consider proposals for improving work and other welfare reform goals for Fiscal Year 2012, we strongly urge you to oppose mandatory drug testing and screening legislation for recipients and applicants of TANF cash assistance. It is our contention that the emphasis of emerging discussions related to welfare reform should be placed on creating mobility programs that are informed by best practices and research and assessed for their equitable impact in addressing the needs and circumstances of low-income and racially/ethnically diverse populations residing in disinvested communities. Moreover, it is vital that we ensure that cuts in government spending are not shouldered by the most economically vulnerable families, who are experiencing record unemployment, increasing rates of poverty, failing schools, and crumbling physical community infrastructure, and who are most hard hit by the foreclosure crisis.

The long deep recession and slow recovery have taken their toll on American households unable to obtain and retain gainful, sustainable employment, particularly African American households who tend to reside in areas hardest hit by the economic crisis. Uncertainty about the future following the brinkmanship of the debt ceiling, ensuing U.S. credit rating and stock market whiplash, resulted in no net new jobs (the first time since February 1945 - World War II) and record unemployment numbers. According to the August Labor Statistics numbers, the national unemployment rate remains stuck at 9.1 percent, while the African American unemployment rate of 16.7 percent reached its highest level since 1984 (in over 27 years). The unemployment picture for African-American males and teen is abysmal. Unemployment rates for African American males and teens rose from 17 to 18 percent and 39.2 to 46.5 percent respectively. Additionally, the drop in the average workweek for private nonfarm payroll from 34.3 hours to 34.2 hours—a decrease in average hourly earnings of 0.1 percent—reveals a new crop of workers in the labor market who are underemployed and undercompensated.

In short, jobs are few and far between. Employment gains have slowed tremendously since April and Americans are struggling to make ends meet. They are either underpaid or unemployed. Meanwhile, federal and state governments have responded to the crisis in America with cuts to much needed education, training and human service programs, while TANF continues to stand along the sidelines. From the onset of the Great Recession and throughout the slow recovery, TANF has yet to respond effectively to the needs of low-income populations. TANF is ill-equipped to cope with today's failing job market because it lacks a countercyclical component vital to weathering a recession. While it is true that TANF's work goal was instrumental in significantly reducing caseloads when the economy was more robust, it is equally true that there was a "welfare reentry" of recipients placed in low-paying jobs without growth opportunities and benefits, resulting in recipients being shifted from one form of poverty to another, and the rolls of the underemployed working poor grew dramatically.

During the recent economic downturn, the growth of TANF caseloads varied significantly among states in response to worsening economic conditions. In some states, TANF caseloads remained stagnant or continued to decline, but, in sharp contrast, caseloads in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program increased significantly in all states during the same time period. Earlier this year, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reported that states are already implementing some of the harshest cuts in recent history for many of the nation's most vulnerable families with children who are receiving TANF assistance. These cuts will reportedly affect 700,000 low-income families that include 1.3 million children; representing over one-third of all low-income families receiving TANF nationwide.

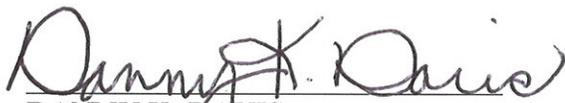
It is our belief that creating more barriers to the receipt of TANF is ill-conceived. Mandatory drug testing falls into that category of ill-conceived barriers. Implementing laws requiring mandatory "suspicionless" drug testing and screening for families is punitive and is not premised on any reasonable rationale. For example, even in the absence of evidence that drug use and/or abuse is particularly prevalent among TANF beneficiaries, this summer, Florida signed a harmful law mandating that applicants for cash assistance pass a drug test before collecting any benefits. At the same time, the State is cutting funding for substance abuse services for not only TANF recipients but also for low-income parents across the board. Such random testing is not only reckless and based on insidious stereotypes but mostly a costly and an inefficient way of identifying recipients in need of drug and substance abuse treatment. Additionally, imposing further sanctions on welfare families will have harsh effects on children. There are better ways to address drug and substance abuse among TANF beneficiaries without adding immeasurably to their already insurmountable barriers or thwarting their efforts to move to self-sufficiency.

We urge you to design a better strategy for reducing the deficit, one that would ensure that low-income families are afforded greater access to post-secondary education and job training programs. Rather than working to enact laws that will make it more difficult for TANF to expand when the need for assistance rises, we, in Congress, should be working together to find ways to make this vital safety net program stronger. Given our nation's high unemployment and lack of job opportunities, investments in education and job training would guarantee more pathways out of poverty for populations with significant barriers to employment.

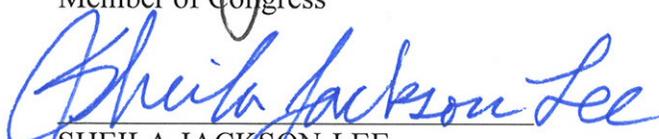
With a weakening jobs market and alarming growing gap between black and white unemployment/wealth, Congress can ill afford not to act quickly and decisively given the economic crisis that exists in America generally and the African-American community in particular . With one in six Americans living in poverty the largest on record dating back to when the census began tracking poverty in 1959, 50 million "food insecure" Americans , and 17.2 million children are at risk of going hungry, our nation needs new and rich ideas and responsive approaches to ensuring the well-being of children and their vulnerable families and communities.

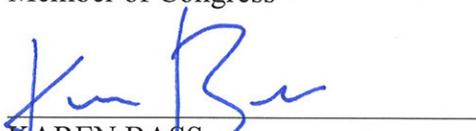
Controlling the debt and deficit must be a top priority, but it is absolutely reprehensible to do so at the expense of poor and low-income families who struggle to make it every day. We should all be committed to ensuring that we all share equally in the burden and responsibility of America's recovery. While the improvements, thus far, in our economy and job market are moving us toward healing as a nation, our most vulnerable throughout the country have yet to feel the benefits. Let us work together as a nation to restore the unity and fundamental fairness that we as a country hold dear, as well as work to promote the democratic principles upon which this country was founded.

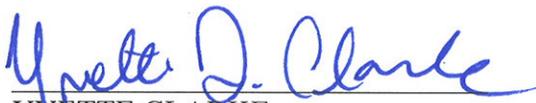
Sincerely,


DANNY K. DAVIS
Member of Congress


GWEN MOORE
Member of Congress

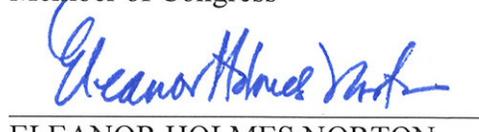

SHEILA JACKSON-LEE
Member of Congress


KAREN BASS
Member of Congress


YVETTE CLARKE
Member of Congress


MAXINE WATERS
Member of Congress


KEITH ELLISON
Member of Congress


ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON
Member of Congress

Gregory MEEKS

GREGORY MEEKS
Member of Congress

Lynn Woolsey

LYNN WOOLSEY
Member of Congress

Jan Schakowsky

JAN SCHAKOWSKY
Member of Congress

Jerrold Nadler

JERROLD NADLER
Member of Congress

Corrine Brown

CORRINE BROWN
Member of Congress

Laura Richardson

LAURA RICHARDSON
Member of Congress

Barbara Lee

BARBARA LEE
Member of Congress

Jesse Jackson Jr.

JESSE JACKSON JR.
Member of Congress

Donna Christensen

DONNA CHRISTENSEN
Member of Congress

Eliah Cummings

ELIJAH CUMMINGS
Member of Congress

Raul M. Grijalva

RAUL GRIJALVA
Member of Congress

Alcee Hastings

ALCEE HASTINGS
Member of Congress

Bob Filner

BOB FILNER
Member of Congress

Rob A. Brady

ROBERT BRADY
Member of Congress

Steve Cohen

STEVE COHEN
Member of Congress

Henry C. Johnson

HENRY C. "HANK" JOHNSON
Member of Congress

Ed Towns

ED TOWNS
Member of Congress

Jose E. Serrano

JOSE SERRANO
Member of Congress