



9to5, National Association of Working Women

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Statement by Linda Meric, Executive Director of 9to5, National Association of Working Women

Comments to be included in the record of the September 8, 2011 hearing on “Improving Work and Other Welfare Reform Goals”

For the Human Resources Subcommittee Of the House Ways and Means Committee United States Congress

On behalf of the members and constituents of 9to5, National Association of Working Women, I urge you to take action to reauthorize and strengthen the TANF program to improve outcomes for low-income children and families.

9to5 is a 38-year-old national, membership-based organization of low-income women, working to improve policy on issues related to ending discrimination, strengthening the safety net, and creating good jobs with policies that promote family-flexibility. Many of our members are or have been directly affected by TANF, and have first-hand experience and knowledge about what works and what doesn't as they struggle to move themselves and their families out of poverty.

Over the last 15 years, TANF has failed to provide a path out of poverty or even a safety net for the nation's neediest families, those it was designed to assist in reaching economic self-sufficiency. Welfare caseloads have plummeted 57% since the law's enactment, but few families who have left TANF have achieved economic security. Assistance that was previously received by 3 of 5 children in poverty now reaches only 1 in 5. Benefits have been frozen at 1997 levels, meaning their actual value has dropped 30%; they are far below the federal poverty level.

Congress must enact legislation by September 30, 2011 to reauthorize or otherwise extend TANF. When TANF is reauthorized, significant changes are needed. Cash benefit levels must be increased to restore their value in real dollars. Efforts must be undertaken to ensure these basic benefits reach all of our nation's lowest-income children and families. Full family sanctions that penalize children when their parents are unable to meet program requirements must be eliminated.

Education and training must be emphasized, not discouraged, so women (and men) can retool and get the skills they need to move into living wage jobs with long-term advancement

opportunities. Allowable education activities should include everything from ESL classes and GED preparation through technical training and post-secondary education, whatever is most effective to assist individual participants in achieving long-term economic security.

Child care, consideration for caregiving responsibilities and other severe barriers to employment, food and transportation assistance, and other work and income supports that enable parents to secure (in a strong economy) and retain employment and help families make ends meet must be fully funded as part of, or alongside, reauthorization. Subsidized employment like that which successfully created hundreds of thousands of jobs through the TANF Emergency Contingency Fund, must be provided, particularly in today's weak economy. Time limits on program participation and limits on hardship extensions should be frozen during periods of high unemployment, so that families' lifetime welfare timeclocks are not ticking or ending at a time when the majority of Americans are facing significant financial and economic stress. Domestic violence protections should be mandatory, not optional, for states.

States' success in implementing the TANF program should be measured by their progress increasing enrollment of low-income children and families, improving family and child well-being, and reducing poverty rates, rather than looking at artificial measures such as reduced caseload and compliance with work requirements and participation rates that are especially unrealistic in the current economy. States must be held accountable for meeting concrete goals and delivering concrete outcomes that illustrate improved economic security for participating children and families. Fair treatment and due process for TANF participants must also be guaranteed.

9to5's members across the country know first-hand that TANF must be strengthened to improve outcomes for our nation's lowest-income children and families. Current federal budget concerns cannot be used to further weaken the program and put these families at even greater risk. Federal budget and policy priorities reflect our nation's values – TANF needs significant improvements and investment to assist our nation's lowest-income families. Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



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