

## **HUFFINGTON POST**

### **'Back At Square One': As States Repurpose Welfare Funds, More Families Fall Through Safety Net**

By Peter S. Goodman

6/19/2013

STONE MOUNTAIN, Ga. -- Brianna Butler would prefer never again to see the inside of the DeKalb County welfare office. She is eager to work. This she says repeatedly.

But she is a 19-year-old single mother with no one to look after her 10-month-old daughter, making work essentially beyond reach. Reluctantly, she has turned to an alternative that might at least provide minimal sustenance: She is applying for monthly \$235 welfare checks from the state of Georgia.

Butler is eligible for those checks. Officially, she is homeless and has no income. Most nights, she sleeps on the floor at her mother's house in this predominantly African-American suburb of Atlanta, where 1 in 5 people live in poverty. Her mother is out of work and behind on her bills. When Butler runs out of money for baby food, she gives her daughter nothing but "water or juice for a day or two," she says, "just to tide her over."

Without childcare, however, she cannot satisfy Georgia's requirements that she first attend four weeks of classes designed to teach her how to look for a job, how to write a resume, how to handle an interview. So, instead of a job or welfare, Butler has only a bitter sense of resignation that she must do whatever it takes to secure cash.

She calls up older men whom she meets on the bus, en route to the county welfare office, in the aisles at the grocery store, wherever -- men who have made plain their appreciation for her youthful looks, while offering their phone numbers. She negotiates transactions that stave off tragedy for another day: sex for diaper money; a night's companionship for a sum that buys frozen vegetables and infant formula.

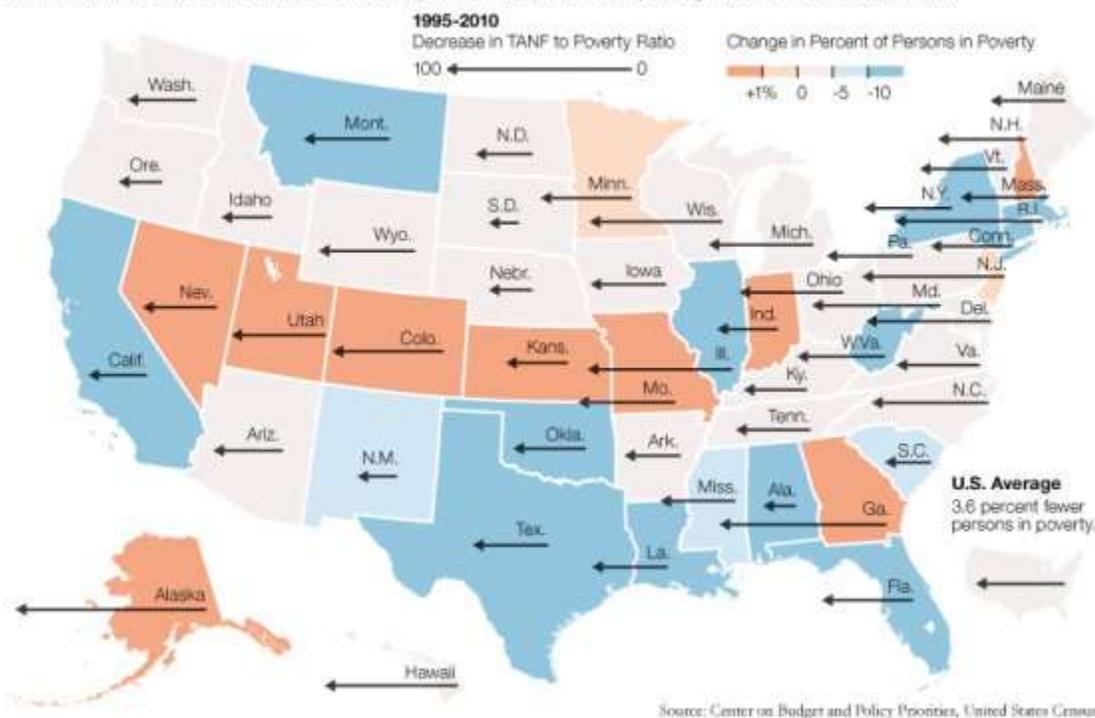
"They want something and I want something," Butler says. "It don't feel good, but I don't put myself down, because I've got to do what I've got to do. It's easy to judge me, so long as you're not walking in my shoes."

Butler is among the millions of low-income Americans sliding into the ranks of a group experts call "the disconnected" -- people who are both out of work and not receiving welfare. Their desperate straits reflect the extent to which key components of the American social safety net have been substantially reduced in recent years, just as the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression has amplified demand for help.

In Georgia, as in many states, gaining cash assistance has become increasingly difficult since the landmark welfare reform signed into law by President Clinton in 1996. Nationally, the share of poor families with children that were drawing welfare cash benefits plummeted from 68 percent to 27 percent between 1996 and 2010, according to an analysis of federal data by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP). During the same period, the number of poor families with children grew from 6.2 million to 7.3 million.

### Fading Assistance

Since 1995, every state has witnessed a reduction in the percentage of poor families with children who are receiving welfare cash assistance. Across the United States, 47 percent fewer families in poverty received assistance in 2010.



Behind these precise data points lie messy stories of frustration over the seeming impossibility of navigating a bewildering welfare system that sometimes seems rigged for rejection; over mounting bills that can't be paid; over plans subject to constant renegotiation in lives ruled by scarcity. Like many states, Georgia does not track what happens to people who are eliminated from its welfare rolls. But in conversations with six women who have tried to gain cash assistance here, this is the picture that emerges: Vexation, fear and deepening trouble.

"When we weaken that support, we're moving people into very desperate situations," says LaDonna Pavetti, a welfare public policy expert at the CBPP. "They never know from one day to the next what life is going to bring."

Butler's experience provides a counterpoint to the narrative of self-sufficiency that was supposed to accompany welfare reform. Previously, a family could receive cash assistance for as long as they met eligibility requirements, which centered primarily on income and assets. But the reforms replaced that system with a new program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), under which the federal government delivers lump-sum grants to states and allows them to tailor their programs as they see fit. Many states have imposed time limits, along with requirements that recipients engage in so-called work-related activities: working, looking for work or attending classes.

Advocates for welfare reform embraced the emphasis on work as a curative for the dependency they said the old system had fostered. Clinton touted the reform as a historic opportunity for poor families to trade welfare checks for paychecks. The government was to aid this transition with key support programs, including subsidized childcare and public transportation.

But a weak job market has eliminated working opportunities, especially for those who lack college degrees. Budget shortfalls have pared the promised supports. The size of the federal TANF grants to states has stayed flat, but shrinking in inflation-adjusted terms. States are given discretion in allocating the grants, and most have diverted increasing slices of this money to plug holes in their budgets, leaving less for cash assistance.

The one feature of welfare reform that has endured, say experts, is the emphasis on slashing welfare rolls.

"It's basically disappeared in a lot of states," says Peter Edelman, the Clinton assistant secretary of social services who resigned his post in protest of welfare reform, arguing that it abandoned vulnerable families. "We have a huge hole in the safety net."

Nowhere has this dynamic been more pronounced than in Georgia. Over the last decade, the number of adult TANF recipients in the state has fallen from more than 29,000 to fewer than 4,000, according to federal data.

"Things happen in welfare offices where people make it very difficult to get on the rolls," says Pavett, the CBPP expert. "Nobody gets on in Georgia."

Between 1996 and 2010, the number of families with poor children nearly doubled within the state, reaching 274,000, according to the CBPP analysis. Yet during those same years, the percentage of Georgia's poor families with children who were receiving cash assistance dropped from 98 percent to just 8 percent.

"The things you have to go through to get it," says Butler. "It's like, 'Why am I even wasting my time?' Everybody in the state knows. You know how hard it is to get TANF."

#### 'THE WORD HAS GOTTEN OUT'

Ann Carter, TANF unit manager at Georgia's Department of Human Services, looks at the plunge in her state's welfare rolls and declares progress. "It's good news," she says. "The goal is to remove them to self-sufficiency, and as soon as possible."

But the state does not know what happens to people who used to be on welfare and aren't anymore. "We don't have a program to follow them," Carter says.

Multiple indications suggest that what happens next is deeper poverty.

Since 2005, the rate of poverty among Georgia families headed by single mothers has climbed from 39.6 percent to 41.4 percent, according to Census data.

Yet even as poverty has expanded in Georgia, the number of people who merely apply for TANF has actually fallen. In 2004, when Georgia's unemployment rate was less than 5 percent, roughly 12,000 people a month applied for cash assistance in the state, according to data tracked by the federal government. Last year, with the state's unemployment rate near 10 percent, the number of applications for cash assistance had fallen by half.

"Once we explain the program, the majority of people are going to withdraw their applications because of the work requirements," says Carter. "Some of them just don't feel that it's worth the effort and the time. The word has gotten out. Georgia has done a great job in educating the community that you're not going to receive the cash benefit unless you participate in the work requirement."

Social service agencies say the message is reinforced inside county welfare offices, where staff actively discourage people from applying for TANF. The fewer people who draw TANF benefits, the more federal TANF money is left to be allocated to other parts of Georgia's budget.

The Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence used to deploy volunteers to county welfare offices to help poor women fill out TANF applications. No longer.

"They're not giving out TANF anymore," says Allison P. Smith, the coalition's director of public policy. "People literally were stopped before they were even given a paper application. They were dissuaded by any number of people working in the welfare office, who would say things like, 'We'll make you jump through a lot of hoops.' 'We'll make you get your tubes tied.' 'We'll be

more inclined to investigate you for child abuse or neglect, because this indicates you can't take care of your kids.' There was such a financial interest on the part of the state to keep the rolls down that they were willing to do whatever they needed to do."

In early March, Shadashia Gilbert arrived at the DeKalb County welfare office in the Atlanta suburb of Decatur to apply for TANF. She was living with her unemployed mother. They were behind on the rent and living day to day.

Brandon's father has been abusive, Gilbert says, and he was out of work, meaning she could not rely on him for child support. She hoped TANF would allow her to keep the lights on while she looked for work and continued college classes.

"This is so temporary," she says. "I'm going to finish my education and be financially stable and not depend on the government for anything."

She and Brandon arrived at the welfare office at about 8:30 a.m. They entered the low-slung brick complex and rode the elevator to the third floor. As soon as they stepped into the TANF department, she felt as if they had entered a space engineered for discomfort.

The windowless waiting room contained rows of blue vinyl chairs with prominent rips in the seats. More than a dozen women occupied the space, some with newborn babies in car seats. Toddlers wandered around, some screaming impatiently. The room had no toys, no play area, nothing to occupy the children stuck there for hours.

There they remained until 4 p.m., she said.

"You just sit in the room, with nothing to eat or drink," she said. "If you leave to go get something to eat, you lose your spot."

When their turn finally came, the caseworker treated Gilbert with contempt, she said.

"She told me, 'Why do you even want TANF?'" Gilbert said. "'You look like you make enough money. You don't want to be down here. You shouldn't want it. The \$250, that's nothing. You shouldn't even want the money.'"

"They judge you," Gilbert said. "They make people feel bad. They interrogate you like you're a criminal. They look down on you because you're asking for help."

Gilbert eventually secured subsidized childcare, then got a job at a local pizza place, where she earns minimum wage. She has given up on cash assistance. She never even received a response to her application, she says.

"They didn't have to tell me," she says. "You just know. They are not going to give it to you."

## FOREVER MEMORIES

In the rare moments when she can see past the struggles that shape her days, Brianna Butler imagines an alternate version of her life. She recalls how she was an honors student in elementary school, how she excelled in advanced trigonometry in high school, and how she had hoped to enroll in a local community college and pursue a career in law, maybe journalism.

"I really like debates," she says. "I used to love writing."

When she speaks in this vein, her eyes flicker to life, revealing her as the teenager she still is, despite her adult burdens. But advanced trigonometry has given way to the basic arithmetic of unpaid bills, a problem set rendered ever more challenging by unplanned motherhood.

She got pregnant in her senior year of high school, she says, after a late-night party and too many drinks. No one in her family was terribly surprised, least of all her mother, who had delivered Butler when she was herself only 18.

"She was just happy that I made it that far," Butler says.

Her mother was out of work and relying on food stamps, earning cash on the side by styling women's hair. She was looking after her own frail parents and left no doubt that caring for the baby would be Butler's sole responsibility.

"She made clear that it was my child," Butler says. "I was going to have to take care of my own child."

Kamiya was born on July 7, 2011. The baby's father was out of the picture by then, and he earned so little through occasional stints as an electrician that he was in no position to pay child support, Butler says. Two months later, still a high school student, she went to the welfare office and applied for TANF, securing a monthly check for \$235.

A distant relative who runs a daycare business agreed to look after Kamiya for free while Butler completed high school. But when she graduated in January, the accumulated pressures of teenage motherhood landed with force. Her relative demanded full payment for daycare -- \$165 a week.

Without a job, she could not pay. Without childcare, she could not even look for a job or make it to the work readiness classes the state required of her as a condition of maintaining her TANF check.

"I would have either had to pay for daycare out of pocket, and I didn't have the money, or pay my mother to watch her," she says. "I don't have the kind of family that helps you out unless they get something in return. I was basically stuck."

She applied for subsidized childcare through the state's program, but the welfare office in Decatur repeatedly mislaid her paperwork, she says. The office referred questions to the state Department of Human Services, which declined to discuss Butler's case, citing confidentiality rules.

Her mother had helped her establish herself in an apartment in a neatly maintained, low-income complex of brick townhouses called the Parc Chateau. She had aimed to get a job and then enroll in college classes. But once the welfare office noticed she was missing her classes, they cut her TANF check and she lost the apartment.

So ended the only time she can recall when she felt a sense of control.

"I like to just be by myself," she says. "I had a chance to think about what I wanted to do with my life. But when it came to paying my bills, none of that thinking done me any good."

The academic literature is lean on people who lose their welfare benefits, but what surveys exist paint a bleak portrait.

A 2000 survey of Iowa families that left TANF a year earlier found that roughly 1 in 10 was subsisting on monthly income of \$500 or less. Compared to those surveyed with higher incomes, these families were more than twice as likely to have experienced hunger and three times as likely to have been homeless. They were also more likely to have lived without heat, electricity or a telephone -- factors that exacerbated their disconnection from potential jobs and aid.

An Urban Institute paper published in 2003 traced how such women coped with their circumstances: through a combination of food stamps, low-income housing programs, charity and the aid of friends and relatives.

In short, in a patchwork fashion.

When Butler lost her TANF check, she moved into a grey, one-story house that her mother had rented in Stone Mountain, where a sign on the living-room wall serves up intentional irony -- "Cherished Moments. Shared Joy. Forever Memories. Family."

What gets shared here, says Butler, is irritation and insufficiency, each reinforcing the other.

Her mother sleeps in one of the four bedrooms, along with her sister, Butler's cousin and Kamiya, who occupies a crib in the corner. Butler's grandparents take up two bedrooms, while her 18-year-old sister and her son fill the last.

Every night, Butler scrounges for her own space.

"I sleep on the floor of whatever room I feel like lying in," she says. "Whatever room where somebody don't mind."

Someone often does mind, and not just about the floor space she occupies -- blocking access to the lone bathroom -- but also about which of the groceries she has eaten. When Butler brings home her own food, she double-knots the bags and hides them in a storage closet.

Someone minds when she borrows clothing.

"I don't have my own clothes," Butler says, on this day wearing a pink- and grey-striped summer dress that her mother reluctantly lent her.

Someone often minds that she and Kamiya are in the way, which feels like a problem nearly every second her daughter is awake.

A rambunctious girl with a face so expressive that she seems almost adult, Kamiya is a rare source of happiness in Butler's life. "That baby's smart," she says. "That baby keeps you smiling so much."

That baby is also prone to doing what babies do, perpetually questing for this or that, climbing up on the living room sofa -- which Butler's mother has deemed off-limits -- and tearing into belongings that sit piled in the bedrooms. She works her vocal cords, demanding attention. Someone always seems to be hollering that Butler needs to come running and grab her. Someone always seems to be implying that she isn't doing enough for her child.

"There's too much arguing at my mother's house," she says. "Everybody in the house makes it clear -- this is not my house."

Butler hopes to move into a nearby motel that charges \$198 a month for a room with a double bed, a microwave and a refrigerator.

"I won't have folks yelling all day," she says. "I've got my privacy. I don't have to worry about nobody touching my stuff."

But how can she manage that move when she doesn't have a job? And how can she get a job or any regular source of income, even a \$235-a-month welfare check, when she has no one to look after her baby?

Any thought that starts off toward a better place tends to run into this thicket and stop cold.

"I wish I would have just waited to have a child," she says. "I've reached the point where I've wanted to give my baby away, 'cause I just can't do it."

She says this and her face contorts in pain -- because she cannot imagine a tenable life with Kamiya, and yet cannot imagine any life without her; because she wonders how her daughter is being shaped by her proximity to strife.

"I worry about her all the time," she says. "Every single day."

Butler's cellphone rings. The caller is a man who sweet-talked her at a train station on her way to the welfare office. He wants to get together, right now. She hangs up in disgust.

"He said he'd get me a phone, get me a room, what they all say they can do -- put money in my pocket," she says. "A lot of people tell me all the things they can do for me, and half of them ain't done it yet."

She doesn't need a phone. She needs infant formula for Kamiya, who has run through the free cans she gets every month from the federal Women, Infants and Children program. She can't get together now, because Kamiya's paternal grandmother has been taking care of her and is supposed to be dropping her off any minute.

Butler sifts through the day's mail and pulls out bills: more than \$400 to cover the cleaning at her old apartment, plus late fees and rent; a \$168 bill from the electric company.

"This junk is hard," she says. "I'm thinking about who I'm about to call to get some money."

A letter from the Department of Human Services tells her that her application for subsidized childcare has been "denied due to funding." What does this mean?

She calls the woman whose name is on the letter, and is told to disregard it.

Even if Butler successfully negotiates this bureaucracy, arranges childcare and then manages to attend her required classes and keep her TANF check, that would supply a grand total of \$235 per month. Her mother is planning to move with her parents into a special home for the elderly, where she will be caretaker, meaning Butler will soon need to secure her own place to live. Her monthly check would hardly cover that.

The core objective of welfare reform was to end dependence on cash assistance. In that regard, it has been a stunning success: Few can depend on \$235 a month. But TANF was also supposed to be a bridge to self-sufficiency. Butler's experience is the sort of story cited by those who argue that it has fallen short.

"I can't wait to get a job," she says constantly. But the jobs she has been applying for -- a sanitation spot at an aquarium, warehouse work, a hotel maid position -- pay no more than \$9 an hour. They all require experience. Her resume ends after a part-time job serving food at a Chinese restaurant for minimum wage. She was recently rejected for a job at Wendy's.

"I'm not a stranger to work," Butler says. "I don't mind doing stuff out of my comfort zone, as long as it's honest. But as far as my experience goes, I don't see getting a job."

Here is what some experts cite as the fundamental flaw of welfare reform: It was launched in the mid-1990s, when the job market was so tight that even a single mother with little experience could land some sort of position, provided she was given the supports. Even then, however, the sorts of jobs she could expect to secure were unlikely to lift her out of poverty. Now, many women on TANF cannot reasonably expect to get any job at all.

Since the passage of welfare reform in 1996, the share of employed working-age women with high school degrees but no college education has dropped from about 54 percent to 46 percent, according to Labor Department data.

To be eligible for TANF today in Georgia, a family of three can have income of no more than \$784 a month. Which means that a single mother who gets on TANF and winds up with a minimum-wage job without health benefits is counted in the ledgers as a success -- even as she remains officially poor.

"We've told everybody, 'You've got to get a job,' but the kinds of jobs that are available for both men and women, with or without children, are not family-sustaining jobs," says Randy Albelda,

an economist at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. "Employment is not the anti-poverty solution. That's the bottom line."

### 'THROW US TO THE WOLVES'

Butler had not wanted to bother with TANF again, not after losing her check in March. But her mother insisted that she seek cash aid as a condition of moving back in, so in April she applied and was again approved. Again, she was told that she would have to attend work-readiness classes every weekday for four weeks before she would receive her check. Again, she applied for subsidized childcare.

And now, again, she is sitting in the waiting room at the DeKalb County welfare office, waiting for her name to be called so she can ask why she has not received the paperwork she needs to establish subsidized childcare.

She has taken two trains and a bus to get here -- a two-hour journey -- using a farecard she borrowed from a friend. She has twice dropped off the required forms, she says, and is baffled as to why the welfare office still has not processed her file.

"There aren't a lot of reasons around here," she says. "The worst part is the waiting and the coming back and the having to start over all the time. They lose your paperwork like it's nothing."

She waits for an hour and is summoned to the front desk, where a clerk tells her that her caseworker is not here. She is off all week, so nothing can be solved today. Butler has missed another day of her required work-readiness classes, putting her check in jeopardy -- this, for nothing.

"This is crazy," she says. "I've got to do it all over again. They're going to end up closing my case. These folks don't care about us. They just give us paper and throw us to the wolves."

The next day, Kamiya's paternal grandmother is willing to watch her, so Butler goes to class. She and a dozen other women gather in a room tucked in a darkened wing of an aging Decatur shopping mall.

The classes only reinforce the futility of her situation, Butler says. The instructors constantly tell students they don't belong in the program.

"They tell you, 'Don't apply for TANF,'" she says. "The lady says, 'If you know you're not job-ready, then don't come.'"

"Job-ready" means having childcare and transportation, as well as being able to satisfy an office dress code. At class, Butler is wearing an oversized, fraying, white button-down shirt emblazoned with an eagle, the logo of a college football team in North Carolina. A guy gave it to her, she says. It's all she has to cover her black tank top, which would be deemed unacceptable. She's wearing her mother's black dress shoes, which are at least a size too small, and her feet are killing her.

These are not just her issues. One woman in her class is "much more homeless than me," Butler says. She's living out of her car, raising three small children. The baby's father is abusive and she has a temporary restraining order on him. How is she supposed to be job-ready?

But when people ask these sorts of questions in class, they get answers that seem dismissive.

"The lady who runs the class, she'll say, 'You find a way to do it,'" Butler says. "She'll tell you to figure it out. She'll say, 'I understand what you're telling me, but' -- there's always the 'but.' She's just following the rules. I learn not to get mad at stuff like that."

Here is the plainest product of Butler's experience with the welfare system, her practiced creativity in keeping Kamiya fed despite her lack of regular income.

"I have to ask people for money," she says. "A male friend. I call somebody and tell them my situation, and they give me an ultimatum: Hang out with them. Go out to eat. Go to their house."

Butler is not coy about what she expects from these encounters -- usually \$40 or \$50, though once she made \$80. The guy took her to Waffle House for dinner, followed by drinks at his house, where she spent the night. She paid her mother \$20 to take care of Kamiya.

She talks about this arrangement as if discussing, say, how one might apply duct tape to patch a crack in a window for lack of money to buy a new pane.

"I just got to keep trying to do what I've got to do," she says.

And yet it takes a toll. Reality seeps in.

"I try not to let it bother me none," she says. "I just hide everything. I just make it seem like everything's straight. But not everything's straight."

Back when she was in high school, she sometimes used to cut herself, she says. When she got pregnant, she stopped, feeling a sense of responsibility, an imperative to endure.

But she wonders how long she can keep it up, she says.

She feels herself sliding into despair.

"The other day, I thought about hurting myself," she says. "When this depression thing comes down, it comes down."

On a recent Friday, she goes into the welfare office to pick up her free bus pass for the following week -- the transportation component of the TANF program. Her caseworker comes out from behind a door to tell her that she has missed too many classes. Her file has been closed.

She is furious. She is confused. It is all so familiar.

"Now I've got nothing," she says. "Right now, I'm back at square one."

UPDATE: Many readers have written in asking how they may help Brianna Butler. She has created a PayPal account for those interested in sending a contribution. Her login is [briannabutler32@gmail.com](mailto:briannabutler32@gmail.com). In addition, several non-profit social service agencies assist mothers confronting issues explored in this story, and readers may wish to consider making a contribution. Among these groups are Dress For Success, which donates professional attire to working women in need, and Baby Buggy, which donates diapers, toys and other essentials for infants.

Disclaimer: You have elected to directly give funds to this individual. For purposes of clarity, any funds that you give are not going to a 501(c)(3) qualified organization or other charitable organization but rather to an individual person. The Huffington Post Media Group makes no representations or warranties as to the legitimacy of this person's story, need for assistance, or the amount of any medical or other bills, if any, owed by this individual. The Huffington Post Media Group makes no representations or warranties that the funds you give will be used by this individual for the intended purpose. The Huffington Post Media Group in no way monitors or oversees the use by this individual of any funds you choose to give to them. The Huffington Post Media Group makes no representations or warranties as to any tax benefits or deductions available to you by reason of giving funds to this individual.