

Washington, DC legislators vote to eliminate benefits for needy families

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On Monday, January 7, the newly constituted 13-member council of the District of Columbia voted to adopt a bill that would impose strict sanctions upon parents who failed to comply with regulations pertaining to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash benefit program. The policy, adopted on an 11-2 margin by the council, was introduced due to criticisms of the district's previous TANF requirements. With nearly 17,000 currently receiving TANF benefits, the policy will result in a continuing spiral of misery for working class families in the district.

The change in requirements was introduced after criticisms were cited at the supposed lax amount of social hurdles placed before recipients, who often received assistance for longer periods than the program's 60-month limit, as well as registering a lack of participation in supplemental work-preparation programs. "Hiding behind children and allowing adults to continue bad behavior is not going to help the children," said council-member David Catania (Independent), who voted against the measure for not being strict enough. As of today, roughly 6,000 families would be affected by the sanctions.

The rules require that each beneficiary must develop an Individual Responsibility Plan (IRP), which will set the amount of activities one must participate in, as well as the services available to them in order to receive their monthly assistance. The different sanctions are broken into three levels, depending on the severity of the infraction by the offending parent.

* Level one: The head of the household is removed from their monthly TANF benefit. This means a deduction from \$428 to \$336 per month for a family of three.

* Level two: The \$428 monthly benefit is slashed in half, to \$214.

* Level three: The entire family is removed from cash

benefits.

It is noteworthy that the original proposal would have forced families to be removed from benefits for a minimum of six months if they should fall behind on their IRP requirements. In the current format in which they were adopted, the sanctions were "softened" to merely a one-month period.

Because of opting to fund the program with the district's own tax money, D.C. was able to skirt certain requirements of the original federal TANF program, adopted in 1996 under the administration of President Bill Clinton. In 2011, however, Democratic mayor Vincent Gray opted to reduce the amount of benefits by 20 percent going to individuals who had been on the program past the 60-month limit. A further reduction in funding by 25 percent was slated to go into effect last summer, but it was delayed due to the Department of Human Services (DHS) wishing to conduct a more thorough study of each of the individual family cases receiving benefits past the five-year allotment. This would lead to a benefits package of just \$257 per month for a family of three.

Advocates for families are worried that the new requirements, rather than allow parents to find meaningful employment, will simply place an impossible burden on many who are in an already difficult situation. "TANF recipients are being given very little help to go from extreme poverty—in many instances generational poverty—to work in a time that there aren't many jobs around," said Judith Sandalow of the Children's Law Center.

Riven with social inequality, the District of Columbia is one of the poorest cities in the country, with nearly one in three citizens in the southeastern Ward Eight beneath the official poverty line and more than half its children living in similar circumstances. At the same time, the city has one of the wealthiest elites in the nation, with an average yearly income of more than \$500,000 for the top 5

percent. Reuters recently reported that due to a “hollowing out” over the past two decades of working class jobs, the majority of federal jobs in the District of Columbia provide a salary higher than \$100,000 per year. Most of the local population is simply left to starve (see “Report details massive growth of social inequality across US”).

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has reported, the district has seen a parallel hollowing out of affordable housing, going from an estimated 65,000 units with rents under \$750 per month to fewer than 50,000 in 2008, while at the same time, homes with rents higher than \$1,500 shot up to 30,000 units from fewer than 12,000 more than a decade ago.

As of last month, the D.C. Council agreed to adopt a program that would put funds toward helping families find housing. The core housing budget for the District of Columbia has been slashed over the last decade, going from \$123 million total in 2004 to just \$64 million as of 2010. Any housing program for the poor in the future will do little to reverse that trend. As if to demonstrate this, upon the council’s vote the program still remains unfunded.

TANF was adopted by Bill Clinton as a part of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act in 1996. The program was promoted as being the means to “end welfare as we have come to know it.” The program required recipients to be actively searching for work or participating in community service while receiving benefits. The act also diminished the time period for which many families could receive benefits, giving recipients a lifetime limit of only five years with the program.

An analysis by the Center for Budget Policy and Priorities found that state block grants that fund the program have diminished in value, limiting the amount each beneficiary could purchase per month. The study found that since the program’s adoption in 1996, the program’s block grant was worth only 58 percent of what it had been during the Clinton administration.



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