

Committee on Human Services
Councilmember Jim Graham, Chairperson
Hearing on Department of Human Services FY 13 Proposed Budget
Thursday, April 19, 2012, 11:00 AM

Testimony of Marta Beresin
Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless

Good afternoon Chairman Graham. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Marta Beresin and I am an attorney at the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless (WLCH). WLCH envisions a city where all persons, young and old, able-bodied and with disabilities, Black, Brown and White, high-income and low-income, have a safe and stable place to live. We believe that, as Franklin Roosevelt declared in 1944¹, housing is a human right. I'm here to testify about the impact of the Mayor's proposed FY 13 budget on the TANF Program, but in particular on low-income children whose families receive TANF.

I want to add my voice to those here today asking the Council to increase the TANF cash assistance budget by \$5.6 million in order to forestall cuts to cash assistance to low-income children, at least one-third of whom are homeless. I'm also here to support the call for \$4 million for housing subsidies for homeless children in TANF households.

When the District enacted time limits last year it did so with only two possible purposes: 1) helping families move from welfare to work; or 2) saving money by cutting cash assistance to low-income vulnerable District children. Unfortunately, studies across the country have shown that TANF time limits achieve neither of these goals and that they cause significant harm to children.

Reducing cash assistance to low-income children does not move families to work. What moves families to work is a strong economy and a low unemployment rate. Throughout the U.S. in the late '90s and early aughts, TANF caseloads fell significantly because the economy was strong. This was true whether or not states had enacted time limits. In DC, we saw a 39% drop in TANF rolls during this period despite having no time limits in effect. When the Great Recession hit, we saw TANF rolls begin to steadily rise as families were unable to find work. The Recession is a great opportunity for DC to concentrate its efforts on helping families remove barriers to work such as substance abuse and domestic violence, and build job skills and education so that when the economy rebounds, families who receive TANF will be ready to fill the jobs that

¹ Roosevelt declared in 1944 that the U.S. had adopted a "second Bill of Rights" that included the right to a decent home. The U.S. signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, recognizing housing as a human right.

are available. Cutting benefits to low-income children during a recession when unemployment rates are still very high only causes severe hardship and poor outcomes for children.²

Likewise, cutting cash assistance to low-income children will not, in the long-run, save the District money. Studies show that families whose welfare benefits are cut or reduced end up relying more heavily on other – sometimes more costly – forms of assistance, such as emergency shelter, food stamps, emergency eviction prevention funding, and foster care. (In DC, it's likely some families whose benefits are cut in October will end up in expensive emergency shelter motel placements next winter.)

It's particularly galling that the District plans to cut cash assistance to children yet again before the TANF redesign has even gotten off the ground. Only 10% of families have been assessed using DHS' newly designed assessment tool and only about 2% have been referred for the newly designed employment and barrier removal services.

Finally, if we're serious about moving families from welfare to work, part of the solution must be affordable housing! DHS' recent assessments found that one-third of children in families receiving TANF are HOMELESS! They're either doubled-up, living in an emergency shelter, or living in transitional housing for homeless families. (Given that a person has to earn \$28/hour or \$57,792/year to afford the average two-bedroom apartment in the District, many more families who receive TANF are likely on the verge of homelessness.) Without safe and affordable housing, finding and keeping a stable job is a pipe dream. Without safe and affordable housing, the search for housing consumes the daily lives of most of my clients. Without safe and affordable housing, homeless children also struggle with the daily stresses of homelessness—as Tyanna's testimony makes clear. (Editor's note: Tyanna's testimony will be posted on this blog later this week.)

And while the pilot program on the TANF redesign conducted by DHS last year showed incredibly positive results in just five weeks, it is significant to note that **every family chosen by DHS for the pilot had decent, safe and affordable housing via the STI or PSH programs.** It's no wonder they were able to increase incomes so significantly and that some were even able to move off TANF—in just five weeks. But as Director Berns testified today, you can't find a job if you don't have stable housing. Housing is closely tied to job success

² See e.g., Scarpace, Ramona, Karen Jung, and Leslie Crichton (2003). The Welfare Time Limit in Minnesota: A survey of families who lost MFIP eligibility as a result of the five-year time limit. Minnesota DHS.

and if we want the TANF redesign to work, we need to invest in affordable housing.

As my colleague Amber Harding testified, **there's a simple, effective and economically efficient way to do this: fund 250 slots of affordable housing for homeless families on TANF.** Rather than balancing the budget on the backs of children simply because they're the least able to speak up, let's pass a budget that truly prioritizes children in the District.