

**Hearing before the Committee on Human Services on the
B18-1061: District of Columbia Public Assistance Amendment Act of 2010
Testimony of Marta Beresin
Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless
November 15, 2010**

Good afternoon Councilmember Wells, Councilmember Barry, Councilmember Alexander and members of the Committee on Human Services. My name is Marta Beresin and I am an attorney at the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless, a resident of Ward 3, and a member of the Fair Budget Coalition. In all three of these capacities, I am here to testify against B18-1061, the District of Columbia Public Assistance Amendment Act of 2010 because of the bill's negative consequences for District children and the District's budget.

Terminating families from TANF would have negative consequences on the District's budget in the form of increased expenditures for homeless services and child welfare.¹ I am going to focus on the increased expenditures for homeless services. Many families use TANF benefits to share rent, mortgages, utilities and food expenses with other low-income families with whom they are temporarily residing after losing their housing. Many such families are on the wait list for shelter at the Virginia Williams Family Resource Center. Nearly all of the 492 families on this wait list as of October 30th are doubled up with other families, some more tenuously than others. While a TANF benefit of \$428/month for a mother and two children is not enough to pay for one's own housing, it is a big help to a parent who is trying to find temporary living arrangements with another family. Often the host family is willing to assist a friend if the friend can help with household expenses. Families who are doubled up with friends often fill their friend's refrigerator with food, help with their heating bill, or contribute a small amount to the rent for the month – in this way they are able to stay out of shelter and help another family avoid a utility shut-off or eviction.

Because this bill would immediately result in termination of benefits for many families, it's likely that the number of families seeking shelter would increase immediately and possibly dramatically. Also, the number of so-called "Tier 1" families, those with no safe place to stay, would dramatically increase. The family shelter system is currently completely full. Because the District must by law shelter families on nights when the temperature with wind chill is likely to drop to 32 degrees Fahrenheit or below, the District would be forced to open additional expensive family shelter facilities at a cost far greater than \$428/month.

Terminating families from TANF also has unforeseen negative consequences for children. As others have testified, B18-1061 would cut families reaching the time limit off "public assistance", as that term is defined in DC Code § 4-202.01. This section establishes the categories of public assistance as including General Assistance for Children, Emergency Shelter Family Services, TANF, POWER, and IDA. Accordingly, families who reached the time limit would be ineligible for each of these programs. A family that needed to be transitioned from TANF to IDA (a federally reimbursable program) because of a severe disability would not be able to do so. A family who could not longer stay doubled-up as described above because of

¹ Short TANF time limits have been associated with higher numbers of substantiated abuse and neglect cases and greater numbers of children in foster care. Christina Paxson & Jane Waldfogel, *Welfare Reforms, Family Resources, and Child Maltreatment*, 22 J. Pol'y Analysis & Management 85, 103. This research focused on time limits that were less than sixty months, but the data is pertinent to any discussion of potential costs and benefits of time limits.

their lack of income, would be ineligible for family shelter. Even if the bill were amended to terminate only TANF benefits, terminating TANF benefits will push already strained families into deeper poverty.² This is unfair to do at a time when families are reeling from the most serious recession and highest unemployment rates we have seen in decades. Families would be unable to buy tokens to send their children to school, unable to purchase diapers, toilet paper, and the myriad of life necessities that are not covered by food stamps, unable to pay a friend to watch their children while they job search, and unable to pay for tokens to travel to job interviews – this is seemingly contradictory to the very intent of the bill – to move families from welfare to work.

While it is an extremely laudable goal to move families who can work off TANF and into living wage jobs, this bill will not do so; rather, it will leave children destitute and other DC programs footing the bill. Rigid time limits have not proven effective in helping families address the circumstances that result in their needing to rely on welfare. Good assessments, good training programs, and adequate work supports are what have proven effective. If we are serious about getting families to work, the District should take the following two steps immediately.

- 1) Research who are long-term recipients of TANF in the District and what services they need to return to work. Much research on this issue has been done in other jurisdictions such as Minnesota. We must understand the demographics of the “long-stayers” in order to come up with the most appropriate solutions; and
- 2) Pass the TANF Educational Opportunities and Accountability Act and ensure that the reforms promised by it are carried out. As others have testified, the bill would redesign the District’s currently broken welfare-to-work program and mandate that all TANF recipients are assessed for conditions such as domestic violence and disabilities that might make them eligible for an exemption from the federal time-limit or eligible for federal disability benefits.

Thank you and I am happy to answer any questions.

² It would also be strange that while families sanctioned because they have failed to participate in work activities could receive a child-only grant, families who reached the life-time limit would be cut off TANF entirely, even if they were in compliance with the work requirements or eligible for an exemption.