

## **The Mayor's TANF Sanction Proposal Will Harm Children and Families and Is Unlikely to Increase Work Participation by TANF Recipients.**

July 20, 2009

The Mayor's budget proposal would give the Department of Human Services the authority to impose greater sanctions on TANF recipients including full family sanctions that terminate aid for an entire family. The Mayor estimates \$6.5 million of savings from his TANF proposal, including the enhanced sanction authority. Much of these savings would likely come from cutting off from TANF the District's poorest children in families whose parents face substantial work barriers.

**Many families are sanctioned because they can't participate in TANF work activities as a result of work barriers.** Research shows that sanctioned families typically are families that face significant barriers to participation. Several analyses of sanctioned welfare recipients have shown that sanctioned families have lower levels of education than non-sanctioned participants, higher incidents of health related barriers to work – including mental health problems and domestic violence and had less work experience than non-sanctioned families.<sup>1</sup> Other studies show that the more barriers a family faces, the greater the likelihood that they will be sanctioned.<sup>2</sup>

**Sanctions cause more hardship for families.** The authors of a survey of research on sanctioned families concluded, “[s]anctioned recipients are more likely to experience material hardships than their non-sanctioned counterparts. Material hardships TANF recipients face include borrowing money to pay bills or falling behind on payments, not having enough food, problems paying for medical care, and experiencing a utility shut-off.”<sup>3</sup>

**Children suffer when their parents are sanctioned.** One study found that infants and toddlers in sanctioned families had a 30 percent greater risk of having been hospitalized since birth and a 90 percent greater risk of being admitted to the hospital after visiting the emergency room.<sup>4</sup> Another study found that preschoolers and adolescents in sanctioned families were at a greater risk for behavioral problems and lower test scores than children in families that hadn't been sanctioned.<sup>5</sup>

**By imposing full family sanctions, the District would turn its back on more than ten years of progressive welfare policies.** Since welfare reform became law in the District, the TANF program has been a safety net for its most vulnerable children and families. The Mayor's proposal would allow for a radical departure from that history.

**The District could better engage families and increase federal work participation rates by investing in programs and staff that can adequately respond to the needs of recipients who face the greatest challenges.** The District's current welfare program does not sufficiently address the needs of TANF recipients who have multiple barriers to work. In order to better serve these families, the District needs to invest in staff who are trained to work with hard to serve families, provide better assessments, and connect families with education, mental health and other supportive services that would help them work or participate in work activities.

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<sup>1</sup> Marcia Meyers, et al., Review of Research on TANF Sanctions. (University of Washington, West Coast Poverty Center, June 2006); Heidi Goldberg and Liz Schott, A Compliance-Oriented Approach to Sanctions in State and County TANF Programs. (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Oct. 1, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Meyers, et al. (2006).

<sup>3</sup> LaDonna Pavetti, Review of Sanction Policies and Research Studies (Mathematica Policy Research 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Meyers, et al. (2006) (citing Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program, Pediatricians Find TANF Sanctions Put Young Children at Risk (2005)).

<sup>5</sup> Meyers, et al. (2006) (citing P. Lindsey Chase-Lansdale, et al., Welfare Reform: What About the Children. Policy Brief 02-1. (Welfare Children, and Families: A Three State Study, Johns Hopkins University, 2002)).