

Oregon Can Do Better Than Harm Poor Kids

The legislature must reject the devastating changes to TANF proposed by the Governor in HB 2049 and HB 5030

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Few Oregonians may know that one of the largest and most important kids' programs in the state is Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). TANF provides poor families time-limited cash assistance to help cover basic needs, while also offering parents job training and other services to help them get into the workforce. Regrettably, in HB 2049 and his proposed budget (HB 5030), the Governor seeks radical changes to TANF — changes that would heap even greater hardship on tens of thousands of Oregon's poorest children.

The Governor's proposed changes for TANF fall into three broad categories: (1) the imposition of a draconian lifetime time limit and procedural barriers that would slash enrollment, (2) reductions in the already meager cash assistance that families receive and (3) reductions in job-related services that help parents obtain work.

The most devastating of all changes proposed by the Governor would impose an 18-month lifetime limit on the time that families can receive assistance, down from the current 60-month lifetime limit. Coming at a time when unemployment is expected to stay at elevated levels for years, making jobs for TANF parents hard to find, the 18-month lifetime limit promises to set thousands of families in poverty adrift and make life even harder for their children.

The Department of Human Services (DHS), which administers the TANF program, has concluded that some of the proposed changes likely will result in families being thrown out into the street and more children ending up in the costlier foster care system.

Thus, it is incumbent on the legislature to enact better policy for the sake of the children and for the state.

Protect and invest in children. Ideally, the legislature would be devising a strategy to reduce childhood poverty, leave TANF intact and, at the first opportunity, look to boost the assistance for Oregon's poorest families with children.

Minimize harm to children. Facing a large revenue shortfall, the legislature may decide to squeeze some savings out of the TANF program. If that is the case, it should cut in a way that avoids or minimizes the harm to Oregon's poorest children. The most obvious cut that minimizes harm to children is the one that reduces support for the JOBS program. Putting money into job-related activities at a time when jobs remain few and far between may not be the best use of scarce resources when the basic needs of children are at stake.

Sunset policy changes. Any changes to TANF enacted by the 2011 legislature that reduce the help provided to poor children and their families should have a sunset provision. Changes to the program enacted in the midst of a fiscal emergency should not undo the carefully planned reform of the program enacted by the 2007 legislature.