

## Proposal would a make bad situation worse

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For the sake of Oregon's most vulnerable children and the future of our state, Gov. John Kitzhaber should heed his own words.

"Today we are spending more on problems than we are investing in people ... problems that could be prevented if we increased the size and effectiveness of our investment in people," the governor rightly proclaimed in his inaugural speech.

The governor's diagnosis makes the case for investing more in our children, yet his budget proposes to slash one of the most important programs protecting Oregon's poorest kids. The proposed cuts to Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) portend greater hardship for tens of thousands of children and, consequently, costlier problems down the road for our state.

TANF is a safety net and path to opportunity for Oregon's poorest families with children. Families receive cash assistance to help cover basic needs, while parents get job training and other services to help them get back into the workforce.

Despite its importance to Oregon children, TANF serves fewer families today than it did when the program began 15 years ago. Families now have to be much poorer to qualify, and the cash benefits don't cover as many necessities as they once did.

The proposed cuts would make it harder for families to qualify for assistance, reduce the already meager cash assistance to the families still eligible and dramatically shorten the time families can get cash assistance and help in finding work. The governor also proposes to eliminate the opportunity for parents to gain education beyond a GED and to shrink assistance to families in which the adult can't work because of a disability.

The governor's proposals for TANF could not come at a worse time for Oregon's poorest kids. The deep recession and anemic recovery make it difficult for their parents to find work.

The Oregon Department of Human Services acknowledges that the governor's proposals for TANF would likely cause some families to become homeless and others to collapse, with more kids ending up in foster care.

That would be a social disaster. Deprivation and stress early in life, scientists tell us, tend to disrupt a child's developing brain circuitry, with profound negative consequences for the individual and society.

The governor's own advisers concur. Before taking office, Kitzhaber convened a team of experts to develop strategies "to ensure that every child enters school ready and able to learn."

In their report, the governor's experts explained that factors such as poverty and family instability have "an almost linear correlation with school failure, school dropout, substance abuse, social dependency and involvement in the criminal justice system." The result is "a workforce that struggles to compete successfully in a global economy and a citizenry that is a liability rather than an asset to Oregon's future."

As such, the proposed cuts to TANF undermine the governor's early education goals as well as his broader attempt to transform how the state prioritizes spending.

It's not too late for the governor to change course and withdraw his short-sighted and damaging TANF proposals.

But if he doesn't, it'll be up to the Legislature to defend Oregon's most vulnerable children and demonstrate a commitment to the future prosperity of our state.

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