

**Testimony before the District of Columbia Council  
Committee on Human Services  
Budget Hearing for the D.C. Department of Human Services  
Income Maintenance Administration**

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**April 19, 2010**

I would like to publicly acknowledge the Department of Human Services for making an effort to protect vital programs the District's poorest residents for fiscal year 2011. Given the rising demand for services, however, the Mayor's budget does not provide enough resources for safety net programs to serve all who need them. The Council should identify revenue increases that would preserve essential programs from funding cuts and allow them to meet the increasing demand for services. Specifically, the District should improve its TANF program so that TANF recipients who can work can get the skills they need, preserve the Interim Disability Assistance (IDA) and grandparent caregiver program, and ensure that agency staffing levels are sufficient to respond to the increasing demand for services.

To help fight the growing poverty in the District and to make more adults work-ready, the District should focus its efforts on restructuring the TANF Employment Program (TEP). With the vendor contracts expiring in September and Congress reauthorizing TANF in October, now is a particularly good time for a redesign of the employment program.. These changes will improve outcomes for TANF recipients and help the District to meet federal TANF work requirements.

First, The TEP should be restructured to include a more thorough assessment and referral process for TANF applicants so that the barriers they face to gaining employment are identified and they can be connected to the proper services to address these barriers. This would result in higher numbers of employable adults, fewer families being sanctioned for failing to meet the work requirements and higher work participation rates for the District. To keep TANF parents in the work program, the District needs to provide services that make the program work.

Second, the District must contract with vendors who offer hard skills training and vocational education training. This would benefit the District in many ways. First, the District would improve its work participation rates by having more adults enrolled in approved federal work activities, which would in turn increase the District's access to federal TANF dollars. Second, vocational education training is the only federally-approved work activity that will allow TANF parents to take adult basic education courses and ESL courses without having to do 20 or 30 hours of another work activity first. If the TEP contracted

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<sup>1</sup> The Legal Aid Society of District of Columbia was formed in 1932 to provide legal aid and counsel to indigent persons in civil law matters and to encourage measures by which the law may better protect and serve their needs. Over the last seven decades, tens of thousands of the District's neediest residents have been served by Legal Aid staff and volunteers. Legal Aid currently works in the areas of housing, consumer, family law, and public benefits.

with vendors who offered vocational education training, TANF parents would gain hard skills training and education simultaneously and they would be meeting the federal work requirements. The District can then use federal dollars to pay these families' monthly benefits.

In order to facilitate this participation, the District should amend its TANF statute to define the five work activities that allow TANF parents to take educational courses or participate in special services. Almost 40 percent of TANF parents do not have a diploma or equivalent. This is a major barrier to employment. The District should amend its statute to reflect the recent change in the rules to vocational education training and to describe the other work activities that include services and educational offerings as permitted by federal law.

Additionally, I would like to discuss the long term viability of the Interim Disability Assistance (IDA) program and the need to protect the grandparent subsidy program. IDA provides essential support to individuals who are too disabled to work but are waiting for the slow bureaucracy of the Social Security Administration to find them eligible for benefits. The program also benefits the District by providing such supports, at least in part, with federal dollars in the form of reimbursements from the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program. We are pleased that DHS reopened IDA after implementing a wait list last June. However, as long as the wait list remains, the long term viability of the program is in question. Therefore, we would urge that additional local dollars be identified so that the program can run without a wait list and assist all who need it. Similarly, we urge the Council to restore the Mayor's proposed funding cut of \$2 million to the \$6 million grandparent subsidy program. This 1/3 cut will harm grandparents who step in to care for their grandchildren when the children's parents can't do so, thus keeping children out of the foster care system.

Finally, as has been discussed before this committee and in the Washington Post, the insufficient staffing levels at IMA make it difficult for families to get the benefits they need. The lack of staff in the face of a rising demand for services continues to create systemic challenges for the families and individuals who depend on Food Stamps, Medicaid and TANF for their survival. As we saw with the closing of two service centers last year, the Anacostia service center was so overwhelmed that media attention was drawn to the poor conditions reported in the dead of winter-pregnant women and elderly residents waiting for 8 hours only to be turned away; residents taking 2 or 3 busses in inclement weather to get to a service center because the one in their neighborhood was closed; crowded waiting rooms and long lines with IMA workers who were stressed because they lacked the capacity to serve the unending throngs of people needing help.

The District is facing the toughest economic crisis it has seen in years. In the midst of the crisis are residents who were poor even when times were better in the District. They are now joined by the newly poor who have lost jobs and homes because of the recession. How the District responds to this growing population will determine how well this population weathers the economic storm.

We recognize that not all of these proposals are revenue neutral. We urge the Council to adopt revenue enhancements to support our most vulnerable residents. The Council should consider: increasing the income tax for DC households with incomes above \$200,000; ending DC's tax exemption for

interest paid on out-of-state bonds; updating the sales tax to include additional services; increasing the minimum tax on businesses to \$250; bringing parity to the alcohol tax by taxing alcohol bought at a store at the same rate as alcohol at a restaurant; and tapping into the DC's "Rainy Day Fund."

Thank you.