

**Testimony before the District of Columbia Council  
Committee on Human Services  
In Support of the TANF Educational Opportunities and Accountability Act**

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The Legal Aid Society supports the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Educational Opportunities and Accountability Act because it will help low-income families get the education and training they need to become more self-sufficient, help the District strengthen its TANF Employment Program and promote accountability among District government agencies and their vendors.

First, we would like to thank Councilmembers Tommy Wells and Michael Brown for the timely introduction of this bill because it supports the District's current efforts to redesign its work program and to promote more individualized assessments and services. If this bill is passed and the TANF program is redesigned to emphasize work **and** education and training, more of the District's TANF recipients could become employed and/or meet federal work requirements. The District would then be able to support these families with federal TANF funds (because they are meeting work requirements), thus freeing up local funds.

The bill has two laudable goals that could help the District improve its work participation rates and strengthen its TANF Employment Program. The first goal is to address the low enrollment of employable TANF recipients with low literacy and few or no skills in appropriate education and job skills training courses. The bill's second goal is to promote accountability for the District and its contracted vendors by requiring regular reports on the success of its program including the number of recipients referred to mental health or domestic violence services and the number of recipients who obtained employment beyond 6 months and up to 12 months and their income.

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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.

## **The District's TANF Employment Program Does Not Provide Sufficient Connection to Allowable Education and Training Services.**

Currently, TANF recipients who lack basic education and training are not connected to the right services that help them overcome these barriers to work. Almost 40 percent of TANF recipients in the District do not have a high school diploma or equivalent and almost 30 percent have little to no work experience.<sup>2</sup> However, in 2008, only 2 or 3 percent of recipients were enrolled in a TEP program that offered adult basic education and job skills training.

There are several factors that contribute to low participation in educational courses. First, the work-first approach of the federal and District TANF programs creates incentives to place recipients in the first low-wage and unstable job they can find rather than to enhance their skills and ability to obtain stable employment that pays a living wage. Second, current District law does not make clear how recipients can comply with federal work requirements while pursuing educational goals related to employment. Finally, the current assessment and referral process employed by the District's Department of Human Services (DHS) does not connect TANF parents with the programs that will help them meet their goals.

This bill addresses all three of these concerns in the following ways. First, the bill encourages the District to combine its work first approach with a model that allows for education and training for TANF recipients who need more help to become work ready. According to a nationwide survey of states' welfare to work programs Portland, Oregon's model, which includes a robust education and training component, was rated the most successful in helping parents get stable jobs and increase earnings. If the District adopts a "mixed strategy" that emphasizes work and provides a range of services that that includes education and training, the same results may follow. Second, the bill clarifies the work activities that permit TANF recipients to go to school or utilize rehabilitative services, such as mental health or domestic violence services, which address specific barriers to work, and finally, the bill mandates that the District assess all TANF recipients using specialized staff so that recipients with work barriers are identified and referred to the services they need to address these barriers.

## **There Needs to be More Accountability for the Performance of the District's TANF Employment Program.**

Another weakness of the current TANF Employment Program is the lack of data on how the District and its third party vendors are meeting the needs of TANF recipients. By requiring the District to report regularly on various performance outcomes, this bill will enable the Council and advocacy groups to track progress in various areas, identify weaknesses and make

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<sup>2</sup> This percentage is reported in "Voices for Change: Perspectives on Strengthening Welfare-to-Work from DC TANF Recipients," Katie Kerstetter and Joni Podschun at 11 (*citing* "A Study of the District of Columbia's TANF Caseload," Gregory Acs and Pamela Loprest, Urban Institute 2003).

improvements as needed. As a result of this legislation, the District's program can be evaluated on, for example: (1) number of referrals to mental health and domestic violence services and the number of those who participated in those services, (2) the number of clients who retained employment for 6 months after hiring and 12 months after hiring and (3) the number of working clients who are at 100% and 200% of the federal poverty level. The final legislation should also include the number of referrals to the Tuition Assistance Program Initiative for TANF (TAPIT) and the number of those enrolled in the program.