



www.legalaiddc.org
1331 H Street, NW
Suite 350
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 628-1161

**Testimony of Haley Hoff
Senior Staff Attorney, Public Benefits Unit
Legal Aid DC**

**Before the Committee on Human Services
Council of the District of Columbia**

Budget Oversight Hearing Regarding the Department of Human Services

May 29, 2025

Legal Aid DC¹ submits the following testimony regarding the Fiscal Year 2026 proposed budget for the Department of Human Services (DHS). Our testimony will focus on programs administered by the Economic Security Administration within DHS.

DHS plays a critical role in ensuring that the District's most vulnerable residents have access to benefits. The budget should ensure that DC continues to invest in making all DC residents' lives better, and to that end, Legal Aid's testimony will address the need for revisions in the Mayor's proposed Fiscal Year 26 budget to ensure District residents have meaningful access to critical safety net benefits. Specifically, the Council should preserve FY25 TANF funding and policies and ensure a cost-of-living increase for cash benefit programs. The Committee should also fund a Human Services Ombudsman to provide residents with meaningful access to DHS and to resolve problems stemming from systemic service delivery issues that have persisted for years.

¹ Legal Aid DC is the oldest and largest general civil legal services program in the District of Columbia. The largest part of our work is comprised of individual representation in housing, domestic violence/family, public benefits, and consumer law. We also work on immigration law matters and help individuals with the collateral consequences of their involvement with the criminal legal system. From the experiences of our clients, we identify opportunities for court and law reform, public policy advocacy, and systemic litigation. For more information, visit www.LegalAidDC.org.

The Council Should Restore Cuts in the Budget to Local Funding for TANF

Under current law, federally funded Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits are paid for up to 60 months. The District continues to pay for benefits beyond the 60 months, using local funds, preventing what advocates refer to as the “TANF Cliff.” This continued assistance is crucial in ensuring that low-income families receive what they need. The Mayor’s budget proposes stopping TANF for adults after 60 months, meaning a families’ benefits would be reduced by at least one household member. For example, a family of four is already expected to make stretch \$956 per month - anyone who lives in DC can recognize how low that is. With this change, their benefits could drop to \$612 per month if two adults have their benefits terminated.

Cutting benefits would lead to increases in evictions, homelessness, domestic violence, with devastating effects on children and their families.

These cuts and the emergencies they create would also be costly to the District. TANF dollars paid to families are quickly invested back into the local economy, when TANF recipients spend their dollars on rent, groceries, and other essentials. Reducing TANF means that the District would lose that revenue, and incur all the expenses that come along with increased homelessness and violence.

Advocates and the Council worked hard to provide these needed benefits in previous years and any proposed reduction would hurt DC families.

We Oppose the Proposed Suspension of Cost-of-living Adjustments for TANF, POWER, and General Assistance for Children through FY2030

The proposed suspension is deeply harmful and unjust. These programs serve families and children living in deep poverty, many of whom rely on modest monthly payments to meet their most basic needs – food, diapers, transportation, and shelter. Without annual inflation adjustments, the real value of these benefits will steadily erode, forcing families to make impossible choices as the cost of living in DC continues to rise. Freezing these increases for five years effectively amounts to a benefit cut, undermining the stability and dignity of those already struggling to make ends meet. We must ensure that our safety net keeps pace with the rising costs our most vulnerable neighbors face every day.

We Recommend that the Council Take Steps to Prevent the Implementation of Higher Sanctions for TANF Recipients

TANF recipients are subject to various job search and job readiness requirements. Recipients currently face sanctions of 6% for not participating in work search

requirements. The Mayor's budget proposes increasing the sanction from six percent of benefits to 25 percent of benefits for the parent. This would have a devastating impact on families who rely on this already low amount of benefits. Increasing the sanction furthers a narrative rooted in racism that low-income families need to be compelled to look for work – ignoring the very real hurdles that prevent people from working such as caring for young children, domestic violence, or mental health barriers. At Legal Aid, we have also often seen DHS incorrectly sanction families or fail to remove sanctions after a family complies with work requirements or meets an exception. Families are already struggling to survive in a city with rising housing, food, and transportation costs and cannot afford to be sanctioned at over quadruple the current rate.

The Council Should Fund a Human Services Ombudsman to Assist and Serve District Residents with Accessing Public Benefits

As Legal Aid, other advocates, and customers testified during the DHS Oversight hearing in March, DHS service delivery issues that have persisted for years have only gotten worse and residents' ability to access the agency has decreased. The result is that District residents struggle to access and maintain the critical benefits administered by the agency – including SNAP, TANF, Medicaid, and IDA. Understaffing is one factor contributing to DHS's service delivery crisis. This exacerbates service delivery issues, including:

- Lack of in-person service delivery and support at the Service Centers, particularly for NEP/LEP customers, including the agency's failure to provide receipts to prove that a customer was at the Service Center,
- The failure to timely process applications and paperwork that customers submit at Service Centers or electronically via District Direct,
- Extremely high caseloads for ESA staff,
- The failure to send notices about customers' benefits, or sending erroneous notices (e.g. telling TANF applicants that they "voluntarily withdrew" their applications or requesting documentation unnecessary to receive the benefit they're applying for),
- The inability to connect with ESA staff via the Call Center, the only option DHS gives customers to follow up on questions and issues related to their benefits, and
- Widespread technological issues that prevent the timely processing and issuance of benefits.

Addressing the sources of chronic service delivery problems, including staffing shortages, training, and technology issues, will be critical in the long term to ensure that District customers can access benefits within the timeframes required by law. However, District residents cannot afford to wait longer for the agency to take these corrective actions and overhaul their systems. The Committee should work with DHS to fund and create a Human Services Ombudsman, which would be a crucial step in assisting District residents with public benefits issues. The person in this role would serve as a liaison between District residents and DHS.

Not only would the Ombudsman's office create a meaningful option for customers to obtain updates and resolve issues around their benefits, but it would free up DHS capacity at every level by lessening the need for processing multiple applications, verifications, and fair hearings that people currently submit when they cannot get information from a Service or Call Center or receive conflicting information.

For these reasons, Legal Aid urges the Committee to work with DHS and the Mayor to fund a Human Services Ombudsman.

Conclusion

These proposed budget cuts fall on our most vulnerable neighbors. Yet they can be avoided if the Council takes a fairer approach than what has been proposed by the Mayor. This is especially true of the proposed cuts to TANF, which would save less than one percent of DHS's operating budget for FY2026,² but be devastating for the nearly 15,000 families that rely on TANF.³ We urge the Council to ensure that funding is used to provide fair and effective service delivery for the crucial benefits programs it administers, and look forward to continuing to work with the Committee on any changes.

² The proposed operating budget for DHS for FY2026 is \$829,606,879 (<https://app.box.com/s/y3a0bdyxpkewnc4gjnuy1pryueg1iw6z>), while the predicted savings of the TANF cuts for FY2026 is \$5,508,000 for the elimination of the COLA and \$2,000,000 ([\(FIS+Fiscal+Year+2026+Budget+Support+Act+of+2025+as+introduced+May+27+2025.pdf\)](#)).

³ [ESA Annual Report 2022.pdf](#), p. 23.