

**Testimony for Hearing on Options for Human Services Programming available through  
the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009  
District of Columbia City Council Committee on Human Services**

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**Monday October 5, 2009 at 10:15 am**

Good morning Councilmember Wells. My name is Jennifer Mezey, and I am the supervising attorney for public benefits at the Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia. This hearing is important to ensure that the District is doing all it can to maximize its access to federal dollars and to bring about the transparency that is often sorely lacking on spending decisions. In addition to hearing from DHS, you have already heard from national experts about how to draw down TANF stimulus funds, how they can be used and what other states have done with these funds.

However, it is important to look at the use of TANF stimulus funds in the broader context of the challenges facing the District's TANF program and those who depend on it and how these stimulus funds can be best used to bring about these improvements. In other words, the use of TANF stimulus funds should be just one piece of a comprehensive strategy to reform the TANF program and ensure better outcomes for those who depend on its benefits and the District government.

There are three major problems with the TANF program -- first, the District does an inadequate job of assessing and addressing the work barriers of TANF applicants and recipients; and second, the TANF vendors do an inadequate job of connecting people who can work but can't find employment with work activities that would help them prepare for work. Finally, the TANF cash grant is woefully inadequate.

Today, I will discuss the first two problems. In order to ensure that the TANF program meets the needs of the vulnerable children and parents who depend on it as well as the District's obligations to the federal government, the District must comprehensively reform the program. DHS wants to make sure that TANF is a transitional program that helps people get into employment. We could not agree more. However, there must be sufficient protections and services for those who face such significant challenges that they will never be able to get off TANF even if they can do productive things while on the program.

The TANF program must do a better job of adequately assessing and addressing families' needs. Trained staff should assess applicants and recipients to determine whether a particular

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<sup>1</sup> The Legal Aid Society 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 70 years, tens of thousands of the District's neediest residents have been served by Legal Aid staff and volunteers. Legal Aid has been practicing in the area of public benefits for a number of years, representing clients with TANF, Food Stamps, and Medicaid cases.

head of household can participate at federally mandated levels. Families who can work but can't find employment need quality education, training and support services (including child care and transportation) so that they can eventually join the workforce. And the District must acknowledge and adequately respond to the need of families who face one or more barriers to employment including disability, domestic violence or the need to care for a disabled or chronically ill child.

TANF stimulus dollars can be one source of funding to improve these flaws. Because these dollars are non-recurring, DHS should identify one-time expenditures -- such as the development of a better assessment tool, the creation of a case management system that can better link recipients with appropriate services, and the creation of training curriculae for the vendors and IMA staff -- which these dollars could support.

But as you will see today, there is going to be a lot of competition for stimulus dollars. For example, filling gaps in the homeless services budget – which serves many TANF recipients – may be a better use of some of these dollars. Therefore, while DHS should do all it can to maximize the stimulus dollars the District receives, reform of the TANF program cannot and should not rest on stimulus dollars alone. DHS should seek input from the Council and advocates to develop a plan to improve comprehensively the TANF program. The agency must hire specialized staff, increase accountability for agency and work vendor staff, better link TANF recipients to education, training and supported work activities, and improve services for those who because of the serious challenges they face may never be able to be employable.

Some of these improvements will require additional funds and others won't. These investments can be supported through a mix of funding sources including more efficient use of current federal and state dollars, as well as new funding like the TANF stimulus funds. But regardless of the funding source, it is these types of thoughtful investments – and not solely the imposition of sanctions and incentives – that will improve the TANF program, thus allowing it to better meet the needs of the District's most vulnerable families.