

CGA Human Services Committee
March 25, 2021 Public Hearing
Testimony Presented by Madri Hall-Faul, MSSW

Support for H.B. No. 6635: An Act Concerning Temporary Family Assistance

Dear Honorable Representative Abercrombie and Senator Moore, Vice-Chairs and distinguished members of the committee:

My name is Madri Hall-Faul. I am a resident of Bloomfield and a social work PhD student studying the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, and I am writing in support of House Bill No. 6635: An Act Concerning Temporary Family Assistance.

By increasing the time limit for assistance, exempting benefits received during COVID, eliminating the penalties on children born after enrollment into the program, and improving benefit adequacy through a cost-of-living adjustment, this bill makes important improvements to a program that is based on outdated and discriminatory paternalistic values.

Fourteen percent of Connecticut's children live in poverty. Out of all age groups, children represent the largest share of the population in poverty, which is a shocking indictment of our societal priorities. A recent report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2019) concludes that "income poverty itself causes negative child outcomes, especially when poverty occurs in early childhood or persists throughout a large portion of childhood." (p.2). As a new mother myself, I know I want to be part of a community that cares for **all** children and works to ensure that these negative outcomes are prevented.

Cash transfers have been shown to be the most effective means of lifting families out of poverty (Sherman et al., 2013; Statistics Canada, 2019). One of the goals of the TANF program is to keep children in their homes, ostensibly through direct cash assistance to parents. Connecticut spends one of the smallest percentages of their TANF grant on direct cash assistance. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (2021) reports that we spend just 8% of our TANF budget on direct cash assistance. At \$597 for a family of three, the current benefit is not nearly enough to ensure that children's basic needs are met. By adding a provision for a regular cost of living increase for the cash benefit and eliminating the penalties for children born after enrollment into the program, H.B. 6635 takes a step towards ensuring that the program provides benefits that are closer to meeting the needs of children in poverty. It is my view, however, that increases to the benefit amount beyond the COLA proposed in this bill should also be considered.

In addition to spending a very small amount on cash assistance, as you know, Connecticut only provides benefits to families for a very short amount of time. At just 21-months, the current time limit for TFA cash assistance is among the shortest in the nation, preceded only by the state of Arizona. While Connecticut does offer extensions on this time limit, we know that the

addition of an administrative burden to get these extensions deters participation and keeps people from accessing critical benefits.

As a social worker, I have worked in the arena of policy implementation since completing my master's degree in 2014. I helped implement Kentucky's Medicaid expansion after the passage of the Affordable Care Act and saw first-hand how important it is that policy is easy to understand and has minimal barriers to access. The current time limit for Connecticut's TFA program makes the program needlessly complicated and places an unnecessary administrative burden on families who are struggling to get by. By extending the time limit to the federal maximum of 60 months, the state will bring its TANF time limit in line with many other states and eliminate a needless barrier.

COVID-19 has had a disproportionate effect on communities in poverty and it has demonstrated that a more robust safety-net is absolutely essential to maintaining a functioning society (Reese, 2020). By making sure that these critical benefits received during the pandemic do not count as part of the family's lifetime limit, H.B. 6635 takes a step toward accounting for the inequity perpetuated and worsened by COVID-19.

While I believe that cash assistance should be provided to all families in poverty without punitive work requirements and time limits, I support the efforts of H.B. 6635 to make the TFA program less restrictive, and therefore more accessible, to families in poverty. Thank you for allowing me the time to testify.

References

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