

To: Human Services and Housing Committee
From: Alicia Temple, Oregon Law Center
Date: January 29, 2019
Re: TANF, HB 2245

Chair Keny-Guyer and members of the committee:

On behalf of the Oregon Law Center (OLC), I respectfully request your support to make much needed improvements to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.

OLC is a non-profit organization that provides free legal help to people struggling to make ends meet. Our mission is to achieve justice for low-income communities in Oregon by providing a full range of the highest quality civil legal services. We advocate for our clients and for the services and programs that help them to overcome poverty. TANF is an important part of the social safety-net that specifically helps the families and their children who are most in need.

TANF is Oregon's principal safety net for children in deep poverty. It helps families that have fallen on hard times, including women and children escaping abuse, avoid homelessness and get back on their feet. Currently, only very poor families that have exhausted all personal resources can get help.

In order to qualify for TANF, a family must be low or very low income. The benefit amount has not kept up with inflation. In fact, in 1970 the cash amount was equal to 71% of FPL. Today, it is equal to only 29%. We know that even a small change in the cash grant amount can make a huge difference for the families who receive it. In a time where living and housing costs are significantly outpacing affordability, the TANF benefits are a necessary but unfortunately still inadequate resource.

Earlier this year, the TANF Alliance met with TANF Family Coaches and staff across our state to hear about the struggles facing participants. DHS has made important adjustments to the TANF program in the past few years, but there is still more work to be done. In every conversation we heard about the struggle to find and afford housing, how the lack of mental health services is leaving families with nowhere to turn in crisis, and a severe lack of childcare options is leaving parents unable to take and keep employment opportunities. These struggles are not specific to families on TANF, they are all related to the big conversations happening right now in this legislative session. But they do help to illustrate the way these struggles are acutely harmful to the families in our state that are struggling to make ends meet.

There are many changes needed to improve the TANF program and truly create a pathway out of poverty for Oregon families. Thank you to the committee for highlighting the needs for families in poverty and working together to find solutions.