

To: Human Services and Housing Committee
From: Alicia Temple, Oregon Law Center
Date: April 3, 2019
Re: TANF, HB 3183

Chair Sanchez 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. For the past year, a workgroup convened by Speaker Kotek with participation from legislators, advocates and DHS agency staff has been looking at the barriers that face those who have been on TANF the longest and who cycle on and off the program. This workgroup shifted into a legislative workgroup conversation to include a discussion of the historically suspended TANF language in statute. Instead of continuing to suspend old program language,

HB 3183-1 intends to clean up the outdated language and replace it with a bill that better reflects the current values of the program and the needs of families.

The -1 amendment makes significant strides towards cleaning up and removing the old language. There is a decade of complex suspension history and we want to ensure it is done right. OLC would like to see a few edits to the -1:

- Page 3, line 6 should include “services” in addition to referrals;
- Include a reference to rulemaking by DHS in section 1;
- Clarity is needed from DHS and LC to ensure Section 5 is not removing services that are currently provided;
- Page 8, line 4 should say “a minimum of” instead of “up to”;
- Due to the complex format of these statutes, OLC has requested assurances from DHS and LC that Sections 11, 12 and 14 repeal past suspensions and do not accidentally remove needed program language.

HB 3183 -1 reflects one part of the workgroup’s conclusions. In addition to suspension language clean up, the workgroup focused on ways to address current barriers facing families on TANF through new or enhanced programs. The group is proposing 4 programs that relate directly to problems brought forward through the data collected and shared by DHS, conversations with DHS and family coaches, perspectives shared by service providers who work directly with TANF families, advocates and with a focus on the priorities of legislators. These four programs are:

1. Behavioral health providers located in DHS SSP offices around the state to ensure timely access to mental health treatment
 - a. \$6.4M for 1 provider in every office
2. Investment in funding to end homelessness for children and families
 - a. \$6.5m for the Housing Stability Program, as reflected in the Governor’s Recommended Budget (POP 122)
3. Expanded education and training opportunities that replicated the success of the REACH program in Southern Oregon
 - a. \$3.5M to provide additional training for up to 800 families around the state, as reflected in the Governor’s Recommended Budget (POP 127)
4. Flexible funding and transition payments for families exiting TANF to help with urgent needs and prevent them from needing to return to TANF
 - a. Up to \$15.2M for 12 month eligibility up to \$1200 per family