

December 18, 2008

Dear President-elect Obama and Members of Congress:

The undersigned groups urge you to include the suspension of time limits in the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program in the economic stimulus legislation currently under consideration. Cutting families off TANF, the national assistance program for impoverished families with children, at a time of high and rising unemployment violates fundamental social justice and human rights principles and will further strain other safety net resources already taxed to the breaking point (including homeless shelters and soup kitchens). You have rightly recognized that jobless workers need the safeguard of extended unemployment insurance benefits. So too, do TANF recipients at risk of losing their benefits at this tenuous economic moment, need to continue to receive these benefits.

Current TANF rules set a 60-month lifetime limit and allow states to set a shorter limit, as about a fourth of the states do. While some exemptions are permitted and while some states continue aid with state funds, each year thousands of needy families lose their benefits solely because they reach the time limit. With the unemployment rate at its highest level in years, there are simply not enough jobs for those reaching the time limit particularly because the TANF population tends to be undereducated. Two fifths of TANF adults have not even completed high school. In difficult economic times, the poor are often hit the hardest, and this will be especially true without increased funding for education and job training. In fact, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, food stamp caseloads have increased dramatically in recent months. The Center also projects that the number of poor children could increase by between 2.6 and 3.3 million as a result of the recession.

While we are pleased that unemployment insurance has been extended and that maintaining food stamp and health care assistance are under discussion in the context of the stimulus package, we remain concerned about those most vulnerable in our society – those whose assistance will shortly run out. TANF parents typically face significant employment barriers even in a strong economy, and these barriers are even more severe for parents whose families reach the time limit. As reported in a recent study by MDRC and the Lewin Group, time limit parents are more likely to have a disabled family member and to have a large family, and less likely than other TANF recipients to have even a high school degree (Welfare Time Limits, April 2008). The same study found that time-limit families experience increased hardship including higher levels of food insecurity.

The economic crisis will multiply and exacerbate these hardships unless time limits are suspended. Higher unemployment rates make it more likely that families reaching the time limit will fail to find employment after benefits end. Suspending the TANF time limit would not suspend work requirements or the penalties for non-compliance with work requirements, although we would also ask that you consider a moratorium on states' TANF participation rates. TANF parents who reach the time limit would have to continue to comply with work requirements in order for their benefits to continue.

The problems we highlight will remain even after the economy begins to recover, because the employment growth we need in order to move families from welfare to work will lag behind the economic recovery. For this reason, we encourage you to suspend the TANF time limits for at least two years or until the economy has fully recovered.

**National Organizations:**

ACLU

American Association of University Women (AAUW)

Americans for Democratic Action

Asian Law Alliance

A Better Balance: The Work & Family Legal Center

Break the Cycle

Children's Defense Fund

Coalition on Human Needs

Family Violence Prevention Fund

Jewish Women International

Legal Momentum

LIFETIME

National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity

National Association of Social Workers

National Center for Lesbian Rights

National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence

National Economic and Social Rights Initiative

National Network to End Domestic Violence

National Organization for Women (NOW)

National Organization of Sisters of Color Ending Sexual Assault

National Women's Law Center

NETWORK, A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby

Radical Women

Rebecca Project for Human Rights

Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law

United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries

Victim Rights Law Center

Women Work! The National Network for Women's Employment

Women's Committee of 100

Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW)

YWCA USA

**State and Local Organizations:**

Alabama Coalition Against Domestic Violence  
Community Action Partnership  
Community Legal Services, Inc.  
Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence  
Direct Action Welfare Group (DAWG)  
East Bay Community Law Center  
Empire Justice Center  
Ending The Violence  
Hunger Action Network of New York State  
In Our Own Voices  
Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence  
Iowa Domestic Violence Intervention Program  
Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia  
Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence  
Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence  
Monsoon United Asian Women of Iowa  
Nebraska Appleseed  
New Mexico Coalition Against Domestic Violence  
New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence  
Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape  
Resilience Advocacy Project  
Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence  
Welfare Warriors