

NETWORK EDUCATION PROGRAM

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TANF Tested: Lives of Families in Poverty during the Recession NETWORK's 2010 TANF Watch Project Summary

Many families were impacted by the recent recession, and various aspects of the federal safety net provided support for people experiencing financial strain, helping to undercut the adverse effects of economic insecurity. However, this time period has also revealed a number of the weaknesses of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a program designed specifically to support families in economic crisis.

The TANF Watch Project examines the current reality of people in poverty. From February to March 2010, more than 800 interviews were conducted at 70 social service agencies in 21 states and Washington, D.C. Adults who were interviewed were members of low-income families that included 1300 children. Survey instruments were designed and analyzed by Dr. Douglas Porpora, a sociologist and professor at Drexel University, in collaboration with NETWORK staff and service providers. Key findings included:

TANF and similar programs fail to help enough people who struggle in poverty.

Throughout the 15-year lifetime of TANF, consistent problems persist: many families that are eligible for TANF do not receive assistance, and many of those who have transitioned from TANF into employment have been unable to rise above poverty.

TANF's "Work First" emphasis is especially problematic during periods of high unemployment and low wages.

Initially, TANF effectively helped families find work. However, the past ten years—marked by economic decline—were not as successful. Over two-thirds of respondents were not working at the time of the survey, and one-fourth were laid off or fired in the past year. For many respondents who had jobs, their positions did not provide enough finances to meet all of their basic needs.

Despite SNAP and other food programs, too many people struggle to pay for enough food to feed themselves and their families.

Hunger is a critical issue for many families. Although a majority of respondents received SNAP benefits, three-quarters experienced food shortages in the past year. Due to this rising need, 81% of social service organizations surveyed saw an increase in clientele in the past two years.

Limited access to education and quality job training prevents many low-income people from finding jobs that lift them out of poverty.

Although education can ensure long-term economic stability for a family, such opportunities are still out of reach for many low-income individuals, including TANF recipients. One-third of the TANF Watch respondents had not finished high school, and 40% of respondents expressed that low education and job training were barriers to employment.

Many people in poverty face serious barriers that hinder their ability to secure employment and government help.

Pursuit of employment and government assistance is challenging for many low-income families, due to varied barriers. Roughly 40% of respondents identified poor transportation and child care as the most critical obstacles to employment. Spanish speakers faced greater challenges to employment, public benefits, education and other services.

"With TANF, the expectations and obligations are high, leaving no room for you to actually succeed. Their obligations leave you with really no way to do anything else to better yourself... a lot of people including myself struggle... With TANF you are required to work so many hours a week, do the required job search, and then report to your TANF worker. All this and still try to maintain an existence with your family."

- Mother in Chicago

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