The District’s TANF time limit, which is poised to cut 13,000 children off from assistance this October regardless of their family’s circumstances, is one of the strictest in the nation. Federal law governing the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program granted states a great deal of flexibility over time limits and other policies, and most have used this flexibility to create time limit extensions for families who need more time.

This is important because a large body of research confirms that families reaching time limits often have substantial problems, including high rates of mental illness and limited cognitive functioning. States that have not created flexible time limits have seen dramatic increases in child poverty, hunger, homelessness, and foster care.

For these reasons, the District should modify its time limit to protect children and to help their parents succeed. The *DC Public Assistance Amendment Act of 2015* would accomplish this by extending assistance for parents and their children who face a severe disability, domestic violence, homelessness or other barriers that have gotten in the way of employment. It also would continue to provide benefits after 60 months for families who are following program requirements, but are still unable to find a job. It would also ensure that TANF supports DC’s poorest children even if their parents cannot otherwise qualify.

**States Have Tremendous Flexibility over TANF Time Limits**

Federal law grants states wide discretion in setting TANF time limits, particularly when using their own funds.

- **Partial Flexibility with Federal Funds**: DC and the states generally cannot provide cash assistance with federal TANF funds to families who have received TANF for more than 60 months. But recognizing that some families need more time, states can use federal funds beyond 60 months for up to 20 percent of the families they assist at any given time.

- **Complete Flexibility with State & Local Funds**: DC and the states are allowed to create policies that “stop the clock” for families or that extend assistance beyond a time limit under certain criteria. If these provisions would lead to assistance beyond 60 months for more than one-fifth of families on TANF, states must use their own funds, rather than federal dollars.

**Most States Have Flexible Time Limits**

Most states built flexibility in their TANF time limits through a variety of exemptions that “stop the clock” – meaning a month of assistance does not count towards the family’s time limit – and extensions that allow a family to continue receiving assistance after they have reached the time limit.
• **Exemptions:** Thirty-nine states have “stop the clock” exemptions for some families, such as those in mental health treatment or have a child at risk of entering the foster care system.

• **Extensions:** Forty-four states have extensions, giving parents more time to deal with issues like domestic violence or caring for a family member with a disability.

• **Continued Assistance after the Time Limit:** Six states have other time limit policies to protect families. New York has a separate state cash assistance program that continues to provide benefits to families. California, Indiana, Maryland, and Oregon remove the parent from the TANF case but allow children to continue to receive benefits. Vermont allows families participating in work activities to continue to receive benefits, and in practice almost all families have continued to receive assistance.

**DC’s Time Limit Is One of the Most Rigid in the Nation**
The District did not have a TANF time limit until 2011 but then adopted one of the strictest policies in the country, with no provisions to accommodate families in special circumstances.

• **No "stop the clock" exemptions.** The initial policy did not even stop the clock for families who were not expected to be looking for work, such as families dealing with domestic violence. Two years ago, a number of time limit exemptions were created, but very few families are benefitting from them in part because DHS has done only limited outreach until very recently. Only 7 percent of TANF families are currently enrolled and in February the Department of Human Services Director acknowledged that “a lot of families qualify for POWER [exemptions] today and who are not accessing it.”¹

• **No extensions beyond the time limit:** DC’s TANF time limit offers no situations in which a family can get aid beyond 60 months. All families are cut off, regardless of their family’s situation, and they can never get back on. The *DC Public Assistance Amendment Act of 2015* is an attempt, for the first time, to create an extension policy.

**Families Reaching Time Limits Typically Have Serious Challenges**
Families who hit the TANF time limit are far more likely than other TANF recipients to experience employment barriers such as physical and mental health problems, substance abuse, and lower cognitive functioning.²

• **High rates of mental health and substance abuse issues.** A recent Washington State study found that two-thirds of parents that left due to time limits had an indication of mental illness, 23 percent had a chronic illness and 25 percent had an alcohol or drug

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¹ Fiscal Year 2015-2016 Performance Oversight Hearing For the Department of Human Services, District of Columbia Committee on Health and Human Services, February 25, 2016

treatment need. They also have less education and less work experience than other TANF parents.

- **Undiagnosed cognitive limitations and disabilities.** A detailed assessment of a small sample of families approaching the time limit in Ramsey County Minnesota (St. Paul) revealed widespread challenges, including limited low IQ and physical and mental disabilities, that had not been identified through basic TANF assessments. The county extended time limits for 65 percent of families reaching the time limit.

- **Undiagnosed problems are likely in DC:** The Department of Human Services acknowledged last year that many of DC’s TANF recipients “have unexposed or undiagnosed barriers that may prohibit them from engaging in services.”

### Children and Families Suffer When Time Limited Off TANF

Research from other states finds that the vast majority of families cut off TANF are not able to replace lost benefits with employment income, leaving many to lead chaotic and unstable lives. This leads to increases in homelessness and child neglect as families cannot meet their children’s most basic needs.

- **Most do not secure steady employment.** A Maryland Study found that families who left TANF because of time limits work in fewer quarters in the year after leaving TANF than other TANF leavers. In Washington, only 45 percent were working three years after their case closed due to a time limit.

- **Many experience food insecurity.** Twenty-one percent of families time limited off of TANF in Utah reported they lacked sufficient food. And nearly 70 percent of Maine families reported that they had to go to a food bank.

- **Many experience housing instability or homelessness.** A Maine study found that 1 in 5 families reported being evicted; having to relocate, often to overcrowded living conditions; or needing to go to a homeless shelter. Washington State found that families who left due to time limits had the highest rates of homelessness – 20 percent were homeless at the end of the three-year follow-up; this was a full six percentage points higher than families who were on TANF for more than a year but left on their own.

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6. DC Department of Human Services. *FY 2016 Budget Request Fact Sheet on the TANF Employment Program*


• **Parents struggle to keep their families together.** When parents are cut off of TANF without a secure job, their children are more likely to be abused or neglected and end up in foster care.\(^{13}\)

• **Child development is threatened.** When TANF benefits are cut off from mothers of preschoolers, their children are three times more likely to have serious behavior problems than other young children.\(^{14}\) Children are also more likely to repeat a grade and less likely to be engaged by their parents in important learning activities like reading when they are subject to strict TANF time limits.\(^{15}\)

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