



TANF Is a Lifeline for DC Families with Children

Recent Cuts will deepen child poverty and should be reversed

By Ed Lazere and Lizuly Merav

Executive Summary

The DC budget for 2026 includes harmful cuts to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, which will affect 14,000 deeply poor DC families with children starting October 2026. Research shows that these policy changes will hurt DC residents who lack economic security and should be rejected. As a result of these changes, **a family of three could see their cash income fall to as little as \$422 a month in 2027 and \$151 in 2029.** If implemented, these cuts will likely lead to large increases in family homelessness, hunger, and other traumas.

TANF provides modest cash benefits to families with little to no other income, enabling parents to care for their children. Despite its essential role in supporting family and child stability, the 2026 budget imposes three major cuts.

First, the budget calls for stopping annual inflation adjustments for TANF benefits (which currently are just \$803 a month for a family of three.)

Second, the budget increases punitive sanctions when parents do not meet requirements to participate in job readiness services — like the new and expanded “work requirements” that will cut millions of people off Medicaid and SNAP nationally. Yet research suggests the pressure of sanctions will not contribute to better job outcomes.

Third, the budget imposes a time limit for receiving full benefits.

These actions to impose financial penalties on families **run contrary to recommendations of a 2016 taskforce**, convened by Mayor Bowser, that called for eliminating time limits because they negatively impact children and for minimizing sanctions. The TANF cuts also run counter to the premise underlying Mayor Bowser's current Career MAP pilot program, which aims to help families shift towards stable employment by supplementing income rather than cutting it. (The cuts in the 2026 budget were proposed during the five-year Career MAP pilot, before formal evaluations were possible.)

TANF families who have no other source of income live on very modest benefits, less than \$10,000 in cash per year for a family of three, and most do not get housing assistance. These families already face very high levels of financial instability, particularly related to housing and food. The proposed TANF cuts would create greater hardship for poor families, financial stresses that would lead to worse education and behavioral outcomes for children.

Mayor Bowser suggested that TANF cuts are needed because of rising program costsⁱⁱ, yet **the number of families receiving TANF has fallen** in recent years; At the same time, local TANF cash expenditures have grown at about the same pace as the overall DC budget.

Most of the mayor's proposed TANF changes were slated for implementation in FY 2026, but the DC Council restored funding to delay any cuts to FY 2027. The Council called for creating a task force to study the proposed changes and possible alternatives. It thus will be **important for the Council to ensure that TANF remains a reliable resource for parents to support their children**.

Background on TANF

DC's TANF program provides cash assistance, childcare, and job readiness services to families with children that have little or no income. Roughly 14,000 families, including approximately 25,000 children, rely on TANF in the District.ⁱⁱⁱ

Some families rely on TANF when a parent is unemployed, either due to a short break in employment or when parents face long-term barriers to employment, such as limited educational achievement or mental health problems. Many TANF parents also struggle to work full-time because they are their children's primary caretaker, they have limited access to affordable childcare in their neighborhood at the required time, or because they are caring for relatives who are seniors or have disabilities.^{iv}

The current maximum TANF benefit (Fiscal Year 2026) is \$803 a month for a family of three, or about \$9,600 a year. In 2025, the most recent year for which poverty thresholds are available, TANF cash benefits equaled just 35 percent of

the federal poverty level — \$26,650 for a family of three — even though the poverty level itself is far too low to support basic needs. When accounting for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) food benefits, a family’s income is roughly \$1,550 a month or \$18,600 a year. Nationally, the vast majority of TANF families do not receive housing assistance, which means that TANF is largely used to pay rent^v; this is likely to be true in DC as well. In addition, SNAP benefits generally are not enough to support an adequate, nutritionally comprehensive diet, which means many families must also use TANF to support food purchases.

Economic stability is essential for children’s success. A large body of research confirms the common-sense finding that poverty harms a child’s development and chance of success as an adult.^{vi}

- Children in families with low incomes enter school well behind other children and perform more poorly. They complete fewer years of education, work less, and earn less as adults.
- Children in these families are more likely to have emotional behavioral disorders and difficulty managing stress. Exposure to toxic stress can also change the immune system and lead to increased inflammation, which is associated with poor health outcomes like asthma, cardiovascular disease, and autoimmune disorders.
- Toxic stress in early childhood is also a risk factor for later risky behavior, like illicit drug use, that can negatively affect adult health.

By contrast, raising the incomes of families in poverty, even by relatively modest amounts, leads to better educational and employment outcomes for children, as well as improved health outcomes as adults.^{vii}

TANF Expenditures Are Growing Modestly in Inflation-Adjusted Dollars

The TANF program has been a relatively stable part of the DC budget in recent years, suggesting that funding this essential program has not put pressure on the city’s finances and thus should not be the basis for any policy changes that will restrict benefits to families.

- The number of families receiving TANF cash assistance has been relatively stable over the past five years and in fact has **fallen** in the last two years. Current participation is close to the average of the past decade.
- Expenditures on TANF cash benefits, counting both federal and DC funds, grew 10 percent between 2019 and 2024, after adjusting for inflation. This

is slightly slower than overall growth in the city’s general fund, which was 11 percent after inflation in this period.

- When just DC funds are considered, local TANF expenditures rose 15 percent during this period, only slightly faster than the overall budget.

TANF Families Are Deeply Poor and Already Face Hardship

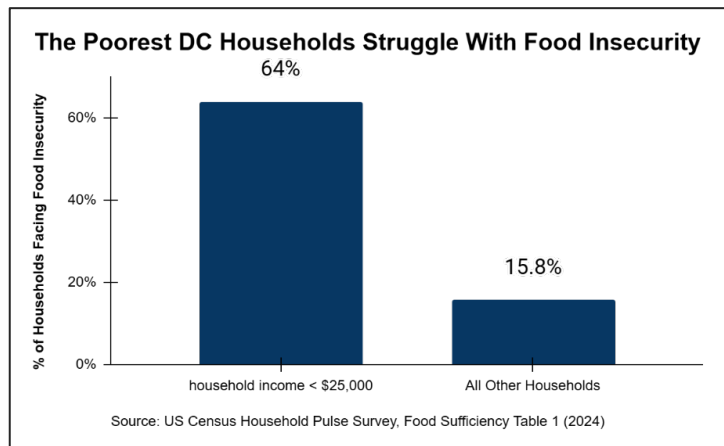
Families relying on TANF have very low cash incomes. Families with no earnings receive less than \$10,000 a year for a family of three in TANF benefits. When the value of SNAP benefits is considered, their income is still just \$19,000. And families lose eligibility for TANF at very low earnings levels — \$30,800 for a family of three.

Data from the Census Bureau, including their Pulse Survey data collected weekly during the pandemic and through much of 2024 to assess economic well-being, provides insights into the struggles that TANF families face.

The Pulse Survey data includes breakouts for residents with low incomes – under \$25,000. This is a reasonable proxy for TANF recipients, though it is likely that TANF recipients face even higher rates of hardship because their incomes are typically well below \$25,000.

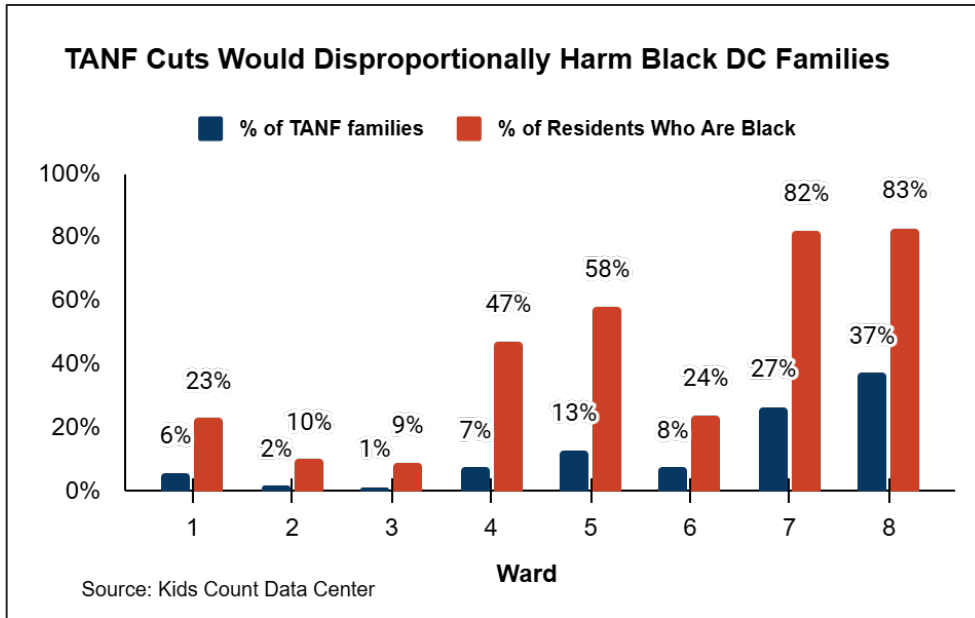
Food Insecurity: Reducing benefits by eliminating cost-of-living adjustments (COLAs), imposing time limits, or increasing sanctions would deprive families who are struggling the most to feed their families of critical support and benefits.

- Nearly two thirds of households earning under \$25,000 face food insecurity, meaning they do not have enough to eat or are not able to afford the diet they need.
- This is four times the rate of all other households.



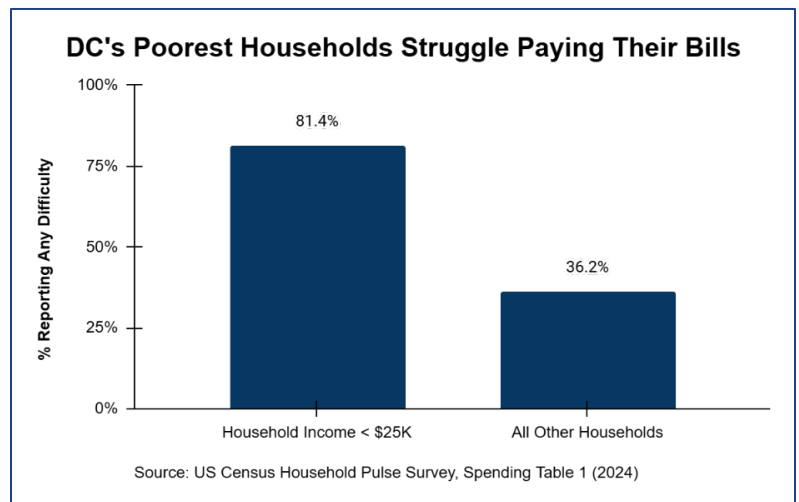
TANF Cuts Would Fall Most Heavily on Black Families and on Wards 7 and 8:

The proposed TANF changes would deepen geographic and racial inequities in DC. Wards 7 and 8, with the highest percentage of residents who are Black, account for nearly two-thirds of families that receive TANF.



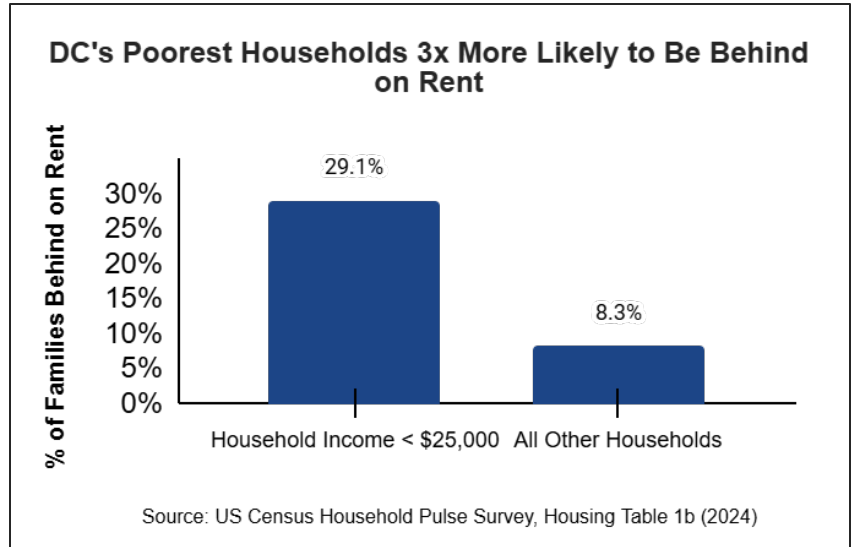
Challenges Paying Bills:

- 81 percent of DC households making less than \$25,000 annually have difficulty paying basic household expenses.
- Households earning under \$25,000 struggle more than twice as much as all other households to pay their basic expenses.

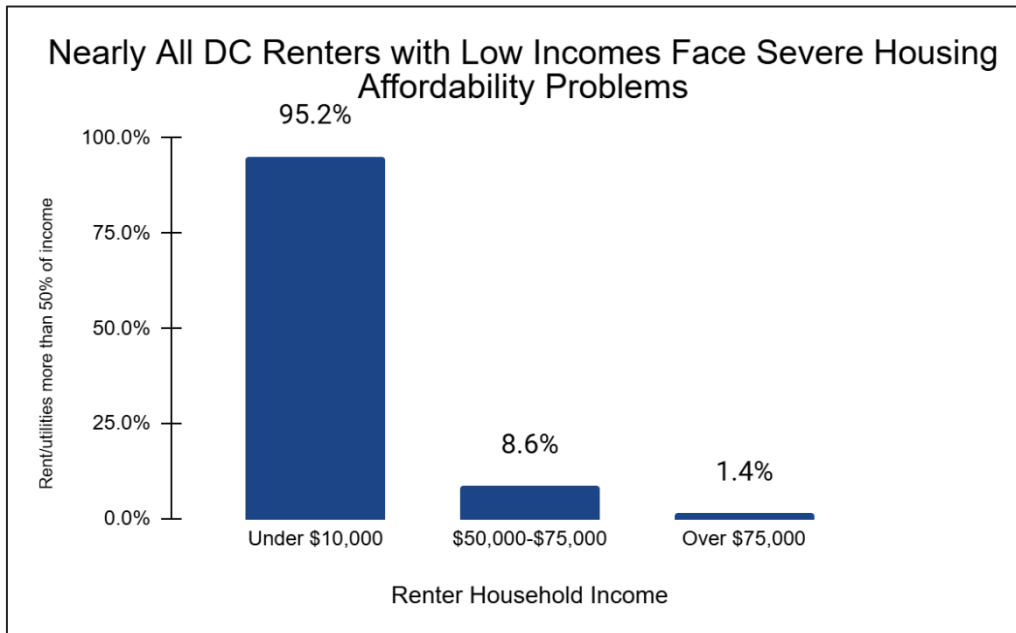


Ability to Pay Rent: Many TANF recipients use their cash benefit to pay rent since federal housing assistance is limited. Cutting TANF would leave the poorest families at risk of eviction or homelessness.

- Nearly one-third of households earning under \$25,000 are behind on rent, compared to just 8 percent of higher income households.



- Another Census Bureau data source, the American Community Survey, shows that almost all households earning less than \$10,000 per year — 95 percent — spend more than half their income on rent. In contrast, severe rent burdens drop to 8.6 percent for households earning \$50,000-\$75,000 and to just 1.4 percent for households earning more than \$75,000.



Any reduction in TANF benefits would devastate families already struggling to pay rent, reducing vital support from those most severely rent-burdened and least equipped to come back from the loss.

FY2026 Budget Rolls Back Protections for TANF Families and Hurts Children

Mayor Bowser’s FY2026 budget proposed numerous changes that would reduce benefits for 14,000 families with children who rely on TANF assistance, pushing them deeper into poverty. The DC Council reversed all changes for 2026, but under current law they will go into effect in 2027. The Council also established a working group to review the changes before they go into effect and possibly recommend alternatives.

The changes and the associated problems are discussed below

Ending Cost of Living Adjustments

The adopted FY2026 budget eliminates cost-of-living adjustments (COLAs for TANF cash benefits starting in 2027, meaning each year the already-low TANF benefit amount would fall further behind the rising costs of necessities like housing and food. It is common policy in DC — and common sense — to adjust core supports annually for inflation, including unemployment benefits, the minimum wage, and rent ceilings under rent control. Inflation adjustments ensure that the intended impact of benefits does not erode over time.

Eliminating COLAs for TANF benefits would have substantial harmful effects that deepen over time.^{viii}

- The elimination of COLAs would reduce benefits \$272 a year for a family of three in just the first year.
- After four years, the impact would be \$1,159 for a family of three, reducing meager TANF benefits 11 percent below where they otherwise would be.

Reinstating Time Limits

The FY 2026 budget reinstates a 60-month time limit for adults receiving cash assistance starting in 2027, meaning that families will face reduced benefits if a parent receives aid beyond that amount of time **despite a recommendation not to impose any time limit** from a 2016 TANF Working Group established by Mayor Bowser.^{ix} The working group was created because DC’s time limits were about to terminate assistance to thousands of TANF families, for the first time in the District’s history, and the Mayor sought a working group to decide appropriate policies to minimize the harm of such a policy. The working group — which included TANF recipients, Department of Human Services employees, TANF employment service providers, and advocates — ultimately recommended eliminating DC’s time limit policy, in the interest of maintaining support to families.

Starting in FY2027, families will face benefit reductions if adults have received cash assistance for 60 months. The budget reduces the family’s benefit by 30 percent in FY2027, 50 percent in FY2028, and 75 percent in FY2029. This would reduce a family of three’s benefit to \$562 in FY 2027 and to just FY \$201 in 2029. **These time limit cuts would push families with no other cash income into deep poverty.**

DC TANF Time Limits Will Reduce Family Cash Incomes Sharply	
	Monthly Income after Time Limit
Current Benefit, Family of 3	\$803
FY 2027	\$562
FY2028	\$402
FY 2029	\$201

Time limits fail to recognize the realities facing families with low incomes.

- A 60-month time limit fails to recognize that job opportunities are affected by economic downturns. There have been two major national downturns in the last 17 years, and a recession is projected for DC this year, all amounting to depressed economic activity. For example, four years into the Great Recession that started in 2008, the DC unemployment rate averaged 8.6 percent, compared with 5.9 percent during the first half of 2008, prior to the recession.^x This means a parent could use most or all of their 60-month time limit even if they turned to TANF only during economic downturns when jobs were hard to find.
- A 60-month time limit also fails to acknowledge that many parents face barriers to earning a stable income that supports their children. These barriers include mental and physical health challenges, domestic violence, lack of employment opportunities for people without a high school diploma, and lack of access to childcare during non-traditional working hours. As discussed in more detail below, it is common for parents receiving TANF to work when they do not face sizable barriers.

Time limits are intended to incentivize families to look for work, but this has consistently proven ineffective.

- Dr. LaDonna Pavetti, a TANF expert who presented to the 2016 DC TANF Working Group, noted that the likelihood of parents finding employment after being cut off from TANF due to time limits is at most 30 percent, based on data from other states.^{xi}
- Dr. Pavetti also cited a study from Washington State, which found that imposing time limits led to increases in homelessness and child

maltreatment, causing more children to enter foster care and an increased use of the child welfare system.^{xii}

Increasing Penalties for Not Meeting Work Readiness Requirements

The mayor's proposed 2026 budget also increases sanctions for families who do not meet the federal requirements for engaging in job search or work readiness activities, starting in 2027, resulting in the loss of up to \$2 million in TANF benefits annually. Currently, families face a 6 percent cut in benefits for non-compliance with that requirement. Federal law requires some level of sanction, but sanctions were set at this modest level following recommendations of Mayor Bowser's 2016 TANF Working Group. The proposal would increase the penalty more than four-fold, to 25 percent. That is a \$201 monthly decrease for a family of three receiving the maximum benefit, compared with a current sanction of \$48 per month.

A family of three facing both time limits and sanctions **would receive just \$422 in monthly cash assistance in FY2027 and \$151 in FY2029**, when TANF time limits are fully implemented.

The mayor proposed these punitive policies even though **the District is making significant progress on work outcomes – without relying on harsh sanctions.**

- According to the Department of Human Services (DHS), the average number of new employment placements for TANF parents more than doubled from 5.1 per 1,000 work-eligible recipients in FY2022 to 10.7 in FY2024.^{xiii}
- Similarly, placements in new education and training programs nearly quadrupled from 11.3 per 1,000 work-eligible recipients to 43.5 over the same period – **exceeding DHS goals.**^{xiv}

These trends show that supportive, rather than punishing, approaches are successful in helping TANF families succeed in entering the workforce.

Other research confirms that a penalty-based approach doesn't lead to increased employment.

- One study found that **90 percent of TANF recipients** who do not face employment barriers **worked over a 5-year period**, with no difference between those who faced work requirements and those who did not.^{xv} This reflects the fact that most TANF recipients who are able to work do in fact have a connection to the labor market.

TANF Cuts in FY 2026 Budget Run Counter to the Supportive Approach of DC's Career Map Pilot Program

The harmful TANF benefit cuts in Mayor Bowser's FY 2026 budget are contrary not only to policy choices her administration advanced a decade ago, but they also contradict a pilot program the Bowser administration is running today. The Career MAP pilot aims to support economic mobility of TANF families through enhanced assistance. The TANF cuts don't make sense considering this effort to explore ways that intensive supports can lead to better TANF family outcomes.

Career MAP offers families five years of enhanced financial aid, as well as added case management and career development support for 600 families. Career Map participants receive the following:

- 5 years of subsidized rent, with families paying 30 percent of their income.
- Financial support to offset public benefits that phase out as earnings rise. Career Map offsets the declines in SNAP and TANF benefits, copays for subsidized childcare, and the need to pay for health insurance when Medicaid eligibility ends. This aid is capped at \$10,000 per year.
- Up to \$1,000 a year for emergency needs.
- \$200 a month, or up to \$12,000 after 5 years, set in escrow for when the family finishes participation in Career Map.
- Employment support, including a dedicated navigator and job training
- Family case management, such as for mental health and education.

The FY 2026 budget includes \$19 million for Career Map.

The Career Map website states that its goal is to "remove barriers that families confront as they pursue employment that can sustain their families." This approach recognizes that families with low incomes face external challenges and that they need additional support to work through them.

The mayor's proposed TANF cuts in the FY 2026 budget would reduce assistance to 14,000 TANF families at the same time the District is providing substantial enhanced supports to 500 TANF families as a possible new model.

Beyond the fact that research demonstrates that punitive approaches to TANF do not lead to improved employment or other family outcomes, implementing deep TANF cuts alongside the Career MAP pilot program doesn't make sense.

- Increased employment due to work requirements is often short-lived, and stable employment is an exception, not a norm. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the share of TANF recipients who had stable employment after being subject to work requirements ranged from 22.1 percent to 40.8 percent. In Portland, Oregon, where stable employment improved the most, the change was small -- from 31.2 percent to 38.6 percent. Recipients who had significant barriers to employment rarely found employment, even in work programs deemed successful.
- Families who continually face sanctions for failure to meet work participation requirements are more likely to fall into deep poverty, especially those who face significant barriers to work such as health challenges and caregiving responsibilities.^{xvi}

Helping TANF Recipients Find Steady Work Requires Assistance, Not Cuts

Research on TANF recipients confirms that when parents turn to public assistance, it's often because they face significant personal or family challenges that limit their ability to work or reduce their ability to compete for living-wage jobs. For example, the prevalence of physical and mental conditions that limit one's ability to work is much higher for recipients of public benefits than among the general population.^{xvii}

Not surprisingly, sanctions and time limits do not lead to reductions in poverty because they do not address the barriers many families face to succeeding in the job market. Most individuals subject to work requirements typically stay poor, with some becoming poorer. Though recipients who can comply with work requirements may have higher employment rates in the short term, their earnings usually aren't enough to lift them out of poverty. The jobs they obtain often don't pay enough, and increased earnings are undermined, in part, by the corresponding reductions in cash assistance or other public benefits such as SNAP and rental assistance.

The 2026 budget's increase of financial penalties on families is contrary to the premise underlying the District's prominent Career MAP pilot program, a program made to help families shift towards stable employment through supplementing income rather than cutting it. This approach is designed around research indicating that higher incomes allow for better long-term results for children including health standards, performance in school, and overall

stability. The District has invested substantially in this five-year pilot, which has not yet been evaluated. It doesn't make sense to adopt punitive TANF benefit policies while also piloting an approach focused on investing more in families with low incomes.

Conclusion

The TANF policy changes and budget cuts adopted this year are a reversal of reforms adopted a decade ago to support families with children and recognize the barriers they face to stable, good-paying jobs. The changes to re-establish time limits and increase financial penalties when parents don't meet program requirements will reduce income for DC's poorest families, putting many at risk of eviction and other trauma, and research confirms they will not result in better employment outcomes. These changes should be rejected. Instead, the District should expand investments in education and training for TANF recipients and adopt the approach of the Career MAP pilot program to promote economic stability through investing in families.

ⁱ TANF benefit levels retrieved from <https://dhs.dc.gov/service/tanf-district-families-on-august-25-2025>

ⁱⁱ Tazra Mitchell, "TANF Benefits Are a Lifeline for DC Families, and Limits and Cuts Will Do Major Harm," Testimony before the DC Council Committee on Human Services, DC Fiscal Policy Institute, June 6, 2025. Retrieved on August 25, 2025 from <https://www.dcfpi.org/all/tanf-benefits-are-a-lifeline-for-dc-families-and-limits-and-cuts-will-do-major-harm/>

ⁱⁱⁱ DC Department of Human Services, "[Dept. of Human Services Temporary Assistance for Needy Families \(TANF\)](#)," accessed June 2025.

^{iv} Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, *Test: Work Requirements Don't Cut Poverty, Evidence Shows*, April 26, 2022, https://www.cbpp.org/research/test-work-requirements-dont-cut-poverty-evidence-shows#_ftn9.

^v Ali Zane, Cindy Reyes, and LaDonna Pavetti, "TANF Can Be a Critical Tool to Address Family Housing Instability and Homelessness," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, July 19, 2022. Retrieved on October 29 2025 from <https://www.cbpp.org/research/income-security/tanf-can-be-a-critical-tool-to-address-family-housing-instability-and>

^{vi} The examples listed here are from Kate Coventry, "When Every Dollar Counts: Child Poverty Has Lasting Negative Effects, But Even Small Income Boosts Can Help," DC Fiscal Policy Institute, February 11, 2016. Retrieved on July 8, 2025 from <https://www.dcfpi.org/all/when-every-dollar-counts-child-poverty-has-lasting-negative-effects-but-even-small-income-boosts-can-help/>

^{vii} Arloc Sherman and Tazra Mitchell, "[Economic Security Programs Help Low-Income Children Succeed Over Long Term, Many Studies Find](#)," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, July 17, 2017.

^{viii} These figures are from Tazra Mitchell, "TANF Benefits Are a Lifeline for DC Families, and Limits and Cuts Will Do Major Harm," op cit.

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- ^{ix} District of Columbia Department of Human Services, “*Recommendations for Development of a TANF Hardship Extension Policy for Washington, DC*,” October 18, 2016. Retrieved on August 25, 2025 from https://dhs.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dhs/publication/attachments/TANF%20Hardship%20Report_0.pdf.
- ^x Seasonally adjusted unemployment data retrieved from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (<https://data.bls.gov/PDQWeb/sm>) on August 25, 2025.
- ^{xi} District of Columbia Department of Human Services, “*Recommendations for Development of a TANF Hardship Extension Policy for Washington, DC*,” *op cit*.
- ^{xii} *ibid*
- ^{xiii} Government of the District of Columbia, *FY 2024 Performance Accountability Report: Department of Human Services* (Washington, DC: Office of the City Administrator, 2024), 15, <https://oca.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/oca/FY24%20PAR%20-%20DHS.pdf>.
- ^{xiv} *ibid*
- ^{xv} Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, *Test: Work Requirements Don’t Cut Poverty, Evidence Shows*, April 26, 2022, https://www.cbpp.org/research/test-work-requirements-dont-cut-poverty-evidence-shows#_ftn9.
- ^{xvi} *ibid*