

# IMPROVING ACCESS TO TANF FOR TEEN PARENTS: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REAUTHORIZATION

## Background

Teen parents may receive their own Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) assistance grants if they meet certain eligibility criteria. Like their older counterparts, teen parents must agree to adhere to certain rules. In addition, the TANF statute has two rules that apply only to minor parents (typically, those under 18 years of age.) The **minor parent education/training rule** prohibits states from awarding TANF cash grants to minor parents unless they are participating in education or training activities. The **minor parent living arrangement rule** prohibits states from awarding TANF cash grants to minor parents unless they are living with a parent, legal guardian, or another adult relative, or in a living arrangement approved by the state. In addition, the 6-month lifetime assistance time clock ticks for a minor parent who is *either* a head of household or married to a head of household.

## Issues

Teen parents are experiencing barriers to accessing and remaining in the TANF program. Among those obstacles:

- **Complex Rules**—In some communities, income-eligible teen parents are not getting the help they need to comply with program rules, and, in some instances, they are even being shut out from receiving applications. These unintended consequences appear largely due to caseworker and teen parent misinterpretation of the minor parent rules.
- **Restricted Living Arrangement Requirements**—The minor parent living arrangement rule has discouraged some minor parents who are unable to live with parents, guardians, or other adult relatives from applying for TANF assistance for fear of being confined to or returned to unsafe homes. Also, some states have not acted vigorously enough to provide alternative living arrangements.
- **Educational Limitations**—The TANF law limits how many recipients can participate in vocational education and still be considered participating in work; they are also limited to 12 months of participation. As a result, adults and teen parents compete for a limited number of vocational education slots. In addition, teen parents ought to be able to participate in post-secondary education if such participation is deemed appropriate for their situation.
- **Premature Time Clock**—The 60-month lifetime limit on TANF assistance takes effect for teen parents who are participating in education and training activities upon turning age 19, even when these parents are still completing the education required of them when they entered TANF as minors. These older teens are forced to choose between completing their education/training or exiting TANF prematurely (and thus losing cash assistance to care for their children) to avoid commencement of the lifetime limit on TANF assistance.
- **Disproportionate Sanctioning**—In some states, teen parents appear to be disproportionately sanctioned compared to TANF families overall.

In addition to the obstacles faced by teen parents, states also face challenges. There is limited information on the number of teen parents nationwide who may be eligible for TANF services, as well as the effects of TANF policies on these young families. This can hinder states' abilities to adequately gauge how to best assist such families.

- **Gap in State Plans**—Current TANF law does not provide an adequate picture of the capacity of states to meet the service needs of teen parents.
- **Lack of Information**—There is limited information about the number, characteristics, and well-being of teen parents and their children, both those enrolled in TANF and those not enrolled in the program. Studies should be conducted that collect more demographic information about teen parent families and that better measure the efficacy of TANF policies.

## Recommendations

To remedy the unintended consequences of the minor parent rules and to strengthen the TANF program for teen parents and their children, the undersigned organizations recommend the following changes to the TANF statute:

### **Complex Rules**

- Permit states to establish a “transitional compliance period,” whereby income-eligible minor parents who at the time of application are having trouble meeting the complex rules and eligibility conditions related to education and living arrangements (such as school dropouts and homeless youth) are nevertheless allowed to receive assistance on the condition that they comply with the minor parent rules within an established period after enrollment.

### **Living Arrangement**

- Ensure that states consult with minor parents about their preferred living arrangement;
- Ensure the appropriate provision of alternative living arrangements for minor parents unable to live at home; and
- Identify transitional living youth projects for older homeless youth funded through the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) as a type of alternative living arrangement.

### **Education**

- End restrictions on states’ ability to count participation in vocational and post-secondary training as a strategy for helping parents, including teen parents, attain access to better jobs; and
- Allow 24 months for such participation.

### **Time Clock**

- Commence the lifetime limit on TANF assistance for teen parents completing their education and training programs when they turn age 20, rather than when they turn age 19, in order to allow these older youth to complete their education/training without the lifetime limit clock ticking.

### **Sanctions Protections**

- Establish sanctions protections procedures that help teen parents understand, avoid, and/or end sanctions.

### **State Plans**

- Require the identification of the extent and strategies to address the unmet service and living arrangement needs of teen parent in state TANF plans.

### **Research Studies**

- Require the Secretary of Health and Human Services to conduct studies of teen parents receiving TANF assistance and state and community best practices related to teen parent enrollment and tracking; teen parents not receiving TANF assistance to identify reasons for non-participation and to measure indicators of family well-being; the effects of paternity establishment policies; and the nature, extent, and impact of sanctions imposed on parents who have not attained age 20.

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## ENDORISING ORGANIZATIONS

### National

Alliance for Children and Families  
American College of Nurse-Midwives  
American Friends Service Committee  
American Humane Association  
Americans for Democratic Action  
Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs  
Center for Community Change  
Center for Impact Research  
Center for Law and Social Policy  
Center for Women Policy Studies  
Center for Third World Organizing  
Child Welfare League of America  
Church Women United  
Coalition on Human Needs  
Coalition of Labor Union Women  
Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism  
Family Violence Prevention Fund  
Girls, Inc.  
Grassroots Organizing for Welfare  
Ms. Foundation for Women  
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepard  
National Association of Child Advocates  
National Center on Poverty Law  
National Association of Service and Conservation Corps  
National Center for Youth Law  
National Collaboration for Youth  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Gay and Lesbian Task Force  
National Head Start Association  
National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty  
National Low-Income Housing Coalition  
National Network for Youth  
National Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Parenting, and Prevention  
National Priorities Project  
National Women's Law Center  
NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund  
Sexuality Information and Education Council of the U.S.  
The Legal Aid Society—Employment Law Center  
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee  
Volunteers of America

### State

Agenda for Children, LA  
Arizona Coalition on Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenting, AZ  
Assets for Colorado Youth, CO  
Association for Children of New Jersey, NJ  
Break the Cycle, Inc., Loudon, TN  
California Alliance Concerned with School-Age Parenting and Pregnancy Prevention, CA  
Chicago Area Project, IL  
DC Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, DC  
Family Planning Association of Maine, ME

Family Planning Services Section, Hawai'i Department of Health, HI  
Futures Program, a project of Women's Opportunity and Resource Development, Inc., MT  
Georgia Campaign for Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention (GCAPP), GA  
Health and Medicine Policy Research Group, IL  
Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health, IL  
Illinois Coalition for School Health Centers, IL  
Illinois Maternal & Child Health Coalition, IL  
Kentucky Task Force on Hunger, KY  
Kentucky Youth Advocates, KY  
Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy, MA  
Mississippi Children's Home Society, MS  
New Mexico Teen Pregnancy Coalition, NM  
New York State Council on Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention, Inc., NY  
North Dakota Children's Caucus, ND  
Office of Kentucky Legal Services Programs, KY  
Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy, OK  
Oregon Teen Pregnancy Prevention Task Force, OR  
Ounce of Prevention/ Kids Public Education and Policy Project (PEPP), IL  
Planned Parenthood Association of Utah, UT  
Public Justice Center, MD  
South Dakota Peace and Justice Center, SD  
Utah Children, UT  
Utahans Concerned about Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenting (UCAPP), UT  
Utah Issues Center for Poverty Research & Action, UT  
Utah Reauthorization Project (UREAP), UT  
Vermont Children's Forum, VT  
Vermont Parent Child Center Network, VT  
Virginia Poverty Law Center, Inc., VA  
Voices for North Dakota's Children, ND  
West Virginia Focus: Reproductive Equality & Education, WV  
Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, WI  
Wyoming Children's Action Alliance, WY

### **Local**

Access, Inc., Pine Bluff, AR  
Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention and Parenting Coalition of Monroe County, Sparta, WI  
Blue Mountain Clinic, Missoula, MT  
Central Florida Behavioral Health Network, Tampa, FL  
Chicago Jobs Council, Chicago, IL  
Child, Home and Community, Doylestown, PA  
Communities in Schools of Philadelphia, Inc., Philadelphia, PA  
County of San Luis Obispo, San Luis Obispo, CA  
El Nido Family Centers, Los Angeles, CA  
Fort Bend ISD-PEP-Teen Parent Program, Sugar Land, TX  
Generations Incorporated, Des Moines, IA  
Hannah House, Inc., Lebanon, NH  
HOPE CDC, Charleston, WV  
Los Angeles Coalition to End Hunger & Homelessness, Los Angeles, CA  
Maine Children's Alliance, Augusta, ME  
Mountain Home Montana, Missoula, MT  
Napa County Office of Education, Napa, CA  
Oasis Center, Inc., Nashville, TN  
Passage Charter School, Montrose, CO  
Pima County Government, Kino Teen Center, Tucson, AZ  
Salt Lake Community Action, Salt Lake City, UT

San Juan Unified School District, Sacramento, CA  
SNAP Long Island, Patchogue, NY  
Southwest Behavioral Systems, Inc., Dallas, TX  
Sunnyside Unified School District Teenage Parent Program, Tucson, AZ  
Teen Alliance for Prepared Parenting (TAPP), Washington Hospital Center, Washington, DC  
Teen Pregnancy/ Parenting Program, Ithaca, NY  
The Parenting Place, Missoula, MT  
Uhlich Children's Advantage Network, Chicago, IL  
United Action for Youth, Iowa City, IA  
Women Empowered Against Violence, Inc. (WEAVE), Washington, DC  
Youth Guidance, Chicago, IL  
YWCA of Minneapolis, Minneapolis, MN  
YWCA of Salt Lake City, Salt Lake City, UT