Testimony before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Human Services

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Public Hearing:
Bill 18-1061, District of Columbia Public Assistance Amendment Act of 2010

Rebecca Brink
Policy Attorney
Children's Law Center
Good morning Chairman Wells and members of the Committee on Human Services. My name is Rebecca Brink. I am a Policy Attorney at the Children’s Law Center (CLC) and a resident of the District. I am testifying today on behalf of CLC, the largest non-profit legal services organization in the District and the only such organization devoted to a full spectrum of children’s legal services. Every year, we represent 1,200 low-income children and families, focusing on children who have been abused and neglected and children with special health and educational needs.

I am testifying today to express CLC’s opposition to the District of Columbia Public Assistance Amendment Act of 2010. We have serious concerns about the harm this bill will do to our city’s most vulnerable children and families. We support the idea of moving welfare recipients to work; however, this bill will not achieve that laudable goal. Instead this bill simply cuts off families from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits after 60 months – a punitive move that will lead to serious material hardship for children and families. Rather than simply terminating families, the District should commit itself to truly improving its TANF program to ensure more recipients are able to move from welfare to work.

The midst of an economic crisis is not the time to begin enforcing a 5 year time limit. Currently, 29% of children in DC live in poverty, up from 22% in 2007. This represents the largest change in poverty rates among any group in DC since the start of the recession. The number of DC residents living in deep poverty — meaning they live below half of the poverty line (just under $11,000 for a family of four) -- is on the rise in DC; up from 8 percent in 2007 to 11 percent in

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1 Children’s Law Center works to give every child in the District of Columbia a safe home, meaningful education and healthy life. As the largest nonprofit legal services provider in the District, our 70-person staff partners with hundreds of pro bono attorneys to serve 1,200 at-risk children each year. Applying the knowledge gained from this direct representation, we advocate for changes in the city’s laws, policies and programs. For more information, visit www.childrenslawcenter.org.

2 Jenny Reid, DCFPI, New Census Data Reveal the Uneven Impact the Recession Has Had on The District, Sept. 28, 2010.
2009. Unemployment in the District is extremely high, with one in ten District residents unemployed and almost 30% of Ward 8 residents unable to find work. It is extremely difficult for even the most motivated TANF recipients to obtain and keep a job. Suddenly cutting off TANF benefits before we have ensured these individuals have secured jobs is recipe for disaster – one that is likely to lead to a sharp increase in the number of children in our city living below subsistence levels. Other state’s experience has shown that time limits are quite effective at reducing TANF caseloads; however, a reduction in caseloads doesn’t translate into families moving towards self-sufficiency it just means more families are plunged deeper into poverty.

Cutting people off TANF will do nothing to help with the underlying problems that lead to their chronic unemployment and the many challenges they face. Rather than cut people off benefits, the District can increase work participation rates by developing policies and programs that respond to the needs of recipients by connecting them with education, training, mental health and other supportive services that prepare them to participate in work activities.

In addition to increasing child poverty, cutting families off TANF will also lead to other devastating consequences for children. A large percentage of individuals who are terminated from welfare experience material hardships such as trouble paying for housing or utilities, poor health and hunger. A study of young children in six large cities found that welfare sanctions and benefit decreases are associated with a significantly increased rate of hospitalizations in young children and

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3 Jenny Reid, DCFPI, New Census Data Reveal the Uneven Impact the Recession Has Had on The District, Sept. 28, 2010.
4 District of Columbia Department of Employment Services, District of Columbia Jobless Drops to 9.9% in August (September 21, 2010).
5 Katie Kerstetter, Increase in DC’s Unemployment Rate Falls Heavily on Those Least Able to Afford It, DC Fiscal Policy Institute (June 25, 2010).
6 Sharron Parrott & Arloc Sherman, TANF at 10: Program Results are More Mixed than Often Understood, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (August 17, 2006). See Figure 2, page 5, showing that the percentage of poor children eligible for TANF that actually receive it has fallen dramatically from 62% in 1995 to 31% in 2003).
significantly increased rates of food insecurity.\textsuperscript{8} Other studies suggest that children in families that are sanctioned do worse in several developmental areas and have lower scores on tests of quantitative and readings skills.\textsuperscript{9}

There is also a link between reduction in welfare benefits and an increase in child maltreatment as measured by contact with child protective services, substantiated cases of physical abuse and neglect and by numbers of children in foster care.\textsuperscript{10} Every year in DC, many children enter foster care simply because their parents do not have adequate housing.\textsuperscript{11} The Child and Family Services Agency’s budget for housing supports to help families on the verge of homeless obtain housing is already extremely limited.\textsuperscript{12} If thousands of families are terminated from TANF and unable to pay their rent, it seems likely many of these families would be reported to CFSA for neglect and without any means to assist these families with housing, many of these children may enter the child welfare system. It’s traumatic for any child to be removed from her family, but it’s particularly tragic when the child is removed not due to any abuse or neglect but simply due to poverty. Children should not be separated from loving families simply because their parents are unable to find a job. Beyond the trauma such separation causes to children and parents, foster care is also expensive, with an average cost in local dollars of over $48,000 per child.

\textsuperscript{8} Children’s Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program, \textit{The Impact of Welfare Sanctions on the Health of Infants and Toddlers, 4 (July 2002).} Infants and toddlers (up to the 3 years) in families who benefits had been terminated or reduced had a 30% higher risk of having been hospitalized, a 90% higher risk of being admitted to the hospital when visiting an emergency room and a 50% higher risk of being food insecure than children in families whose benefits had not been decreased.

\textsuperscript{9} West Coast Poverty Center, \textit{Review of Research on TANF Sanctions, Report to Washington State WorkFirst SubCabinet, 36 (2006).}

\textsuperscript{10} The largest and most comprehensive study, which reviews data from all states from 1990-1998: Christina Paxson & Jane Waldfogel, \textit{Welfare Reforms, Family Resources, and Child Maltreatment, Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2003).} Two other studies (of Michigan and Illinois) found a link between family sanctions and increased contact with child protective services or the increased odds of having a child maltreatment allegation. Although one study (Milwaukee) found no link between family sanctions and child welfare involvement. West Coast Poverty Center, \textit{Review of Research on TANF Sanctions, Report to Washington State WorkFirst SubCabinet, 37 (2006).}


\textsuperscript{12} The Rapid Housing program was funded at $1.19 million for FY11.
We do not dispute that the District’s TANF program is flawed and that reform is necessary. The program must do a better job of initially screening recipients for exemptions to the work requirements, connecting recipients with meaningful education and job training opportunities and ensuring individuals leave welfare for employment that provides a living wage. The Council should work with the Department of Human Services and advocates for low-income families to implement appropriate reforms that will lead to District residents moving from welfare to work. While this process is underway, we must continue to allow recipients to receive TANF benefits without the 60 month time limit so that their basic needs can be met and our poorest children are not left homeless and hungry.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to your questions.