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D.C. Weighs Welfare Cut As Budget Gap Looms

Aid Would Be Reduced For Recipients Failing To Meet Work Rules

By [Henri E. Cauvin](#)
Washington Post Staff Writer
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The Fenty administration wants to save several million dollars by cutting back on welfare benefits for people who are not working or using the city's help to find a job.

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The monthly benefit, which for a family of three is \$428, would be cut in half for any recipient deemed employable who does not meet the work requirement for six months. If the recipient were to go another six months without complying, the District would be prepared to cut off benefits altogether, the city's human services director told advocates for the poor last week.

The prospect of such cuts has alarmed advocates, who say that with more people turning to welfare benefits and city unemployment at nearly 11 percent, this is not the time to be scaling back payments to the poorest residents.

Many of the people who would face benefit cuts have mental illnesses or other problems that make it difficult for them to find jobs, said Ed Lazere, executive director of the D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute. "The people who tend to be sanctioned tend to be the most down-and-out families, the most troubled families," Lazere said.

But faced with a projected \$666 million revenue shortfall over the next two years, Mayor Adrian M. Fenty (D) and his staff have few easy choices left as the D.C. Council prepares for its vote on the new budget Friday.

About 16,000 District households, including one in three children, are served by the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, said Katie Kerstetter, an analyst at the D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute. TANF, which provides cash assistance, is funded with state and federal money and administered by the states. Recipients typically also qualify for food stamps and Medicaid, which are not affected by the District's proposal.

The District has not sanctioned many recipients who fail to meet TANF's requirement that they hold jobs or participate in job search programs. Policies vary among the states. Some, such as Virginia, impose sanctions immediately. Under federal law, at least 50 percent of the recipients must meet the work requirements, which vary depending on the age of children in the home.

The District's practice has limited its ability to use federal funds for TANF payments, and the city has elected to use local money to cover the remaining households.

The rising TANF caseload and the increasing number of households that do not meet the work requirements have strained the city's resources, City Administrator Neil O. Albert said recently in testimony before the council.

Of the more than 8,000 TANF households subject to the work requirement, 500 to 600 are in full compliance, according to the memorandum prepared by Albert's office. More than 6,000 that receive full benefits are not participating in the program's job search process at all, according to the memorandum.

The city wants to move at least 1,000 recipients into compliance, which would increase the federal funding available for TANF, according to the memo. To encourage them to find jobs, the District is proposing to increase the monthly benefit by \$100 for families that have been or begin meeting the target set by the city.

Neki Swinton, a 33-year-old mother of four and a TANF recipient, said she has been on and off welfare since she was 16 and was not helped by the welfare-to-work program that she went through twice.

Swinton, who lives in Southeast Washington, said she is frightened by the thought of her TANF benefit being cut. "The economy in the state that it is and the cost of living, for a person like myself, for that to be cut in half . . . would send everything backwards for me."

The District declined to make anyone available to discuss the proposed changes. The proposed budget for the Department of Human Services says the new approach would save about \$6.2 million.

It is clear, though, that the move is about more than cutting costs. The memorandum, provided to the D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute, calls the policy shift "significant" and describes the changes as a "new covenant of mutual responsibility with those we serve."

The city appears to be particularly concerned about long-term TANF recipients. About 3,000 households in the District have been on TANF for more than five years, and about 600 of those have been receiving benefits for more than 10 years, according to the memorandum.

Federal guidelines prohibit anyone from receiving TANF benefits for more than five years. The District is paying the full amount for anyone beyond that limit.

That is not the only cost, District officials said. "The unintended consequence has been to rob those same families of the capacity growing potential of the program," the memorandum from the city administrator's office reads. By pushing people to work, the city would be setting a "path for freedom from public assistance," it adds.

Some experts say that after the changes that began in the 1990s, there aren't many easy cases left among welfare recipients. "Most of the people who could work have been working and aren't anywhere near the welfare office at this point," said Elizabeth Lower-Basch, a senior policy analyst for the Center for Law and Social Policy.

"When you're sanctioning these cases, you're not solving any of their underlying problems," she said. "All you're doing is cutting off some or all of a family's income."

In a meeting with advocates last week, Department of Human Services Director Clarence H. Carter said the District plans to take an increasingly tough line with TANF, according to a lawyer who was at the meeting. Carter told the advocates that although families would not be cut off entirely in the coming fiscal year, they would face that prospect the next fiscal year, said Josh Gupta-Kagan, a senior attorney with the Children's Law Center.