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## Protect Oregon Children: Support HB 4081

Testimony of Janet Bauer, Policy Analyst  
Before the House Committee on Early Childhood and Family Supports  
February 8, 2018

Chair Lively, Co-chairs Bonham and Piluso, and members of the committee: My name is Janet Bauer. I am a policy analyst with the Oregon Center for Public Policy. We are a member of the Oregon TANF Alliance.

I am here today to talk about how we support children and their families facing some of the most dire circumstances. For families with little to no income or assets, our TANF program provides limited-term cash assistance and services to help them avoid homelessness and get back on their feet. For over 50 years, the TANF cash grant has been the primary financial lifeline we offer to struggling families with children, but the level of assistance we offer is paltry.

In the earlier years of the program, our state offered a more meaningful level of cash assistance than it does today. In 1970, the maximum TANF grant was equivalent to about 71 percent of the federal poverty level. That meant families struggled but they had closer to what they needed to meet their basic needs. We have seldom increased the grant amount, and increases have not kept up with inflation. By 1996, the year of welfare reform, we were offering the equivalent of 43 percent of the federal poverty line. Today, our TANF grant is just 29 percent of the federal poverty level. Our [recent fact sheet](#) spells out these details.

At 29 percent of the poverty level, our assistance is failing to serve the purpose of keeping a household stable enough to take steps toward better circumstances. Instead, more TANF families live in precarious situations, at risk of losing children through child welfare involvement.

The level of economic privation TANF requires of families is particularly harmful to children and their chances in life. Abundant research shows that deep poverty is toxic to children. It hampers normal brain development, making it more difficult for children to do well in school.

The TANF Alliance has advocated for increases in the TANF grant amount since we formed in 2011. This situation begs the question, when will Oregon act to reverse the downward spiral of our assistance to families through TANF? When is the right time? We have long passed the point of responsible action.

The [fact sheet](#) we share outlines three ways to begin to rebuild the TANF grant level.

The bill before you today is the most modest of requests. HB 4081 asks for no new money during a biennium. It simply asks the legislature to reinvest any unspent budgeted TANF funds that arise due to caseload declines back into the program to increase the grant amount and boost JOBS program services, instead of diverting those funds outside of TANF.

I urge you to approve HB 4081. Thank you.