

To: Early Childhood and Family Supports Committee
From: Alicia Temple, Legislative Advocate, Oregon Law Center
Date: February 8, 2018
Re: Testimony in support of HB 4081

Chair Lively and members of the committee:

On behalf of the Oregon Law Center (OLC), I respectfully request your support of HB 4081. This legislation would make much needed improvements to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.

OLC is a non-profit organization that provides free legal help to people struggling to make ends meet. Our mission is to achieve justice for low-income communities in Oregon by providing a full range of the highest quality civil legal services. We advocate for our clients and for the services and programs that help them to overcome poverty. TANF is an important part of the social safety-net that specifically helps the families and their children who are most in need.

In order to qualify for TANF, a family must be low or very low income. The benefit amount has not kept up with inflation. In fact, in 1970 the cash amount was equal to 71% of FPL. Today, it is equal to only 29%. We know that even a small change in the cash grant amount can make a huge difference for the families who receive it. In a time where living and housing costs are significantly outpacing affordability, the TANF benefits are a necessary but unfortunately still inadequate resource.

In 2015, HB 3535 made clear this legislature's commitment to find ways to invest in the TANF program, including a proposal to a future change to reinvest the savings from caseload reductions.

HB 4081 asks to the legislature to reinvest any caseload savings in the TANF program back into the program and specifically to put it towards an increase in the cash grant amounts or per the -1, in the jobs opportunity and basic skills programs. The legislature has designated money to the program for the biennium and we believe those funds should be kept in the TANF program and continue to be used to help our most vulnerable families.

There are many changes needed to improve the TANF program and truly create a pathway out of poverty for Oregon families. HB 4081 is an important step towards creating a more effective program. Over the course of the next biennium, we believe this timely reinvestment of caseload savings will lead to increasingly better results for family stability and success in the workforce.