

Oregon TANF Should Respond to the Needs of Oregon Families Affected by the COVID-19 Crisis

Testimony submitted by Janet Bauer, policy analyst, March 18, 2020

For some families economically hit by the coronavirus pandemic, Oregon's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program is the last line of defense. To be effective in protecting children and families in the current circumstance, Oregon should immediately make key amendments to the program, including the following:

1. Suspend TANF work requirements, as a public health measure. Most TANF families are required to carry out an employment plan to receive benefits. For many participants, carrying out that plan would involve violating current public health directives for social distancing. For nearly all participants, child care would also be needed, yet availability of child care settings that meet the evolving health and safety requirements during the crisis are, at best, unknown. Given the stakes and the evolving standards, Oregon should suspend employment-related requirements in the TANF program during the emergency.

2. Put a moratorium on face-to-face meetings. To comply with social distancing requirements, Oregon should not require a face-to-face meeting for application and program recertification. Other communication options should be explored.

3. End all program terminations. During this time of disruption, TANF families may be additionally challenged to meet their basic needs while caring for out-of-school children. Requirements to connect with case managers to recertify their grant and provide the necessary verifications add to those challenges. Oregon should prioritize family stability by ending all program terminations, during the emergency.

4. Expand TANF emergency assistance. Oregon should enable more families to access short-term, non-recurring TANF emergency assistance. The short-term benefits of up to four months are more streamlined in that they do not trigger requirements such as child support assignment, time limits, and work requirements. Further, Oregon should consider raising the income eligibility limits for the program to enable the state to help more families in need during this time. Oregon's TANF income eligibility limits are extremely low — now about a third of the federal poverty level. Greater flexibility in those thresholds with regard to the emergency assistance program could help families keep a roof over their heads and prevent homelessness among children during this difficult time.

Thank you for your considering these recommendations to help Oregon families experiencing economic hardship during the health emergency.