

Life Support

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and related employment services has helped thousands of people like Jamaica get back to work. Its own future looks less positive.



Jamaica Imani-Nelson

PHOTO BY JENNIFER JANSONS

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

Through the clarity of her own past, Jamaica Imani-Nelson can see the future, in a sense, of thousands of Oregon families struggling to overcome poverty and unemployment.

It does not look good.

Not too long ago, Imani-Nelson was in their shoes, one of the 30,000 families — including about 55,000 dependent children — using the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and related programs to get back on their feet. TANF, as it's known, provided a small cash allowance per month, but it also enveloped Imani-Nelson with programs to help her overcome her barriers to employment: recovering alcoholism, employment gaps, a legal history and incarceration. Because without a job, and with two small children, \$488 per month from TANF was no measure of surviving.

With support, however, it worked. She competed for and received an internship with PovertyBridge. Within three months, she was hired and is now a full-time employee there.

Under Gov. John Kitzhaber's proposed budget, an estimated 7,000 families with children will lose that kind of stability or support. Kitzhaber is proposing more than \$67 million in reductions in TANF as part of an across-the-board effort to balance the budget against a \$3.5 billion anticipated shortfall. It's a penny-wise and pound-foolish cut, observers say, that will result in more families becoming homeless, more children entering foster care, and fewer people getting back in the work force. Earlier this month, hundreds of people who have or currently receive TANF, along with advocates for families and children in poverty, testified in defense of TANF before the Joint Ways

and Means subcommittee in Salem, spilling out into the hallways and into waiting rooms to give their testimony. Imani-Nelson was among them.

"It is our reasonable duty to make sure that our children, our most vulnerable community members are safe, that they are taken care of, that they are not neglected," Imani-Nelson says. "If this proposed cut is set in place, we are neglecting our reasonable duty to do just that. We will be throwing thousands of children in Multnomah County into the street."

Since 2007, the caseload of people enrolled in TANF increased 57 percent — from 18,600 families to 30,000 today. There's no question that the economic slump and chronically high unemployment in the state have driven the increase: The number of two-parent families on TANF increased 330 percent in the past two years. Approximately 95 percent of all families receiving TANF have no earnings. The maximum from TANF is \$506 per month, with a lifetime benefit limit of 60 months, according to federal policy.

Kitzhaber's budget would cut that down to 18 months, making it the shortest time limit in the nation, and it would cut employment-related childcare. On average, TANF recipients qualify for and use TANF for 24 months.

"Even somebody receiving TANF right now, it is hardly getting enough to pay the rent," says Jean DeMaster, executive director of Human Solutions, which helps secure housing for families with children. "Families on TANF are doubled up and they're just scraping by to pay the rent. If the TANF is eliminated, they won't have enough money to pay the rent. It means more families stay with other people to pay the rent, and when landlords see that, they say, 'No, you can't live

here,' and then people will become homeless. It will increase homelessness, there's no question about that."

Families stay on TANF until their children can go to school, then they go back to work, DeMaster says. They cannot afford rent, food and childcare. These cuts will force families to either lose all support, or put their children in unstable or unsafe

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FORMER TANF RECIPIENT, NOW WITH POVERTYBRIDGE

environments in order to take temporary employment.

"TANF is a safety net, and we should be increasing TANF, not decreasing it," DeMaster says. "That's the travesty in this."

Michelle MacMurray arrived in Portland on the run from domestic violence. She had three babies in tow. TANF helped her get into housing, get day care and supported her for a month, at which point she found a job, stabilized her life, and left TANF. "I had breathing space," MacMurray says.

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