

LIFE SUPPORT, from page 1

"That was the success story."

Years later, she was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, which has attacked her organs. She was no longer able to work, and with three teenage boys, she couldn't keep up with rent. She became homeless and had gone to her sons' school to tell their teacher that they might not make it to school the next day because of the situation.

"As a mother, it is a horrible feeling in your heart that you have to go to someone else to help you take care of your own. It is a hard, hard thing to look at your children and know that someone else is supporting them, not you."

The teacher called TANF and got MacMurray back on assistance, and it continues to support her while she is unable to work. MacMurray says she doesn't understand how there isn't funding to support vulnerable families.

"I'm not highly educated with politics, but I do know our homeless rate is astronomical. I know that we have children who are hungry because I see them coming to my house hungry. I see women struggling who are trying to keep their family together, who choose not to go to the drug route. ... If you're living in it, it just doesn't seem plausible to me that the government can't see it. When I see the children every day going past my house, and I see these women walking, trying to look for jobs that aren't there. To cut that out, we're going to have a homeless rate that the shelters and the churches are just not going to be able to take care of. I know a lot of people who are in the same situation I am where we're just one thing shy of being on the street."

State Rep. Tina Kotek represents Portland's North and Northeast neighborhoods. She says she is working to have the federally recommended time limit of 60 months kept in place, which advocates say would cost about \$13 million. She also wants to tap into the state's rainy day fund to cover those costs and keep the Job Opportunity and Basic Skill, or JOBS, component in place. Kitzhaber's budget would cut that program by 60 percent.

Unlike other human service assistance, TANF is funded through a fixed block grant. It is not an entitlement program that expands and contracts with the number of people enrolled.

"What's unique about the TANF cuts is that it's one of the only cuts that actually eliminates programs for a large number of individuals," Kotek says. "I don't think people understand how vulnerable these families are and how limited the resources are when you are on TANF." Kotek says. "I have no doubt that families who are already struggling to keep housing will lose their housing and become homeless if they will

be cut from the TANF program. There's just no other choice for a lot for those families."

And children then will fall into the foster care system, which costs an estimated \$2,200 a month in support.

"Even though they are and want to be good parents, they don't have the resources to keep their children safe," Kotek says.

Tapping into the rainy day fund isn't going to solve all the problems, and no doubt it is being eyed by every program on the governor's chopping block, but it could help prevent families from being cut from assistance altogether.

"The idea that the charitable sector can pick the slack in the meantime is unrealistic," Kotek says.

"The economy is going to get better," Kotek says. "We have to hold on to these families as long as we can so they can get back into the work force. A lot of people who joined the TANF roles had been working. So when the economy improves enough, these people will go back to work. Let's not hold on to money when we could be helping families and not hurting them."

Regan Grey is the policy director with Children First for Oregon and one of the hundreds who appeared to testify before the joint subcommittee. She brought with her a woman who had her children returned to her because of TANF. The system for foster children already is stretched thin with existing demand, she says, and these cuts will only add to the problem.

"We are definitely in a shortage of foster parents," Grey says. "And then there's the point that children do better if they can stay in their own home. And children that can be returned home quickly do better than those who are in it long term. Children who age out have much lower success in employment."

Grey throws the responsibility to both Salem and Washington, D.C., where tax cuts have been extended. "At the same time they're telling these families they can't provide services, they are pouring out money to corporations and the wealthy."

The JOBS program pairs TANF recipients looking for employment with training and businesses looking to give them a chance. It includes nearly \$1 million in subcontracting dollars to local nonprofits that work with businesses to find people jobs. The current budget proposal would cut \$30.5 million from JOBS and cut job search assistance down to 12 weeks. In all, it cuts the program by more than half.

"So not only would it be potentially kicking people off the program arbitrarily at 18 months, we wouldn't be providing the support they need to get back into the work force," Kotek says.

Molly Dorney works with Steps to

Success through Mount Hood Community College, one of two hubs in the Portland area (along with Portland Community College) that works to return TANF recipients to the work force. With a monthly grant of \$395 for a single parent with one child, people have to work to survive.

"When the JOBS program is successful, we take someone from being a tax liability to being a taxpayer," Dorney says. "We also are improving the lives of the families. Those kids need to see somebody going to work, somebody going to school, somebody making those efforts, and that's part of what we provide."

Although many of the JOBS program clients have some barriers to work, a new influx arrived with the recession, Dorney says. The number of two-parent families has tripled in the past two years. People with master's degrees suddenly found themselves without enough money to buy diapers. But there are jobs out there, Dorney says. In Multnomah and Washington County combined, JOBS has secured an average of 257 hires each month, exceeding

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— OREGON REP. TINA KOTEK

the goal set by the Department of Human Services for the past seven months. In addition to that, the work experience program is filling in gaps for social-service organizations that need the manpower.

"They are patching the holes in the safety net that reduced government and private funding are causing," Dorney says. "There's more demand and less money, and part of that is being patched together by our students who are in the community providing those services, gaining skills, building their resume so they're more employable in the end."

"It gave me hope," says Imani-Nelson, now the administrative assistant with PovertyBridge, which connects people in poverty with mentors to navigate the system. She has been with the organization for more than year now. "It replenished my self-esteem and my self perspective. Depression had set in. Your best decision is to figure out how you're going to survive, and no one should have to live under that kind of stress."

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