

Despite steep cuts, TANF retains 5-year limit for services

BY AMANDA WALDROUPE
STAFF WRITER

The 60-month time limit to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program will not be cut by the Oregon Legislature, as many advocates for low-income and impoverished families feared. The proposal on the table was to slash the lifetime time limit to 18 months, giving Oregonians the lowest time limit in the nation.

The Joint Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Services, which writes the budgets for the state's human services programs, approved TANF's budget and program changes during committee meetings this week, including funding to preserve the 60-month time limit, as well as some programs and services. The vote caps off months of campaigning by people in poverty and their advocates to prevent people from losing their housing and children as a result of the cuts.

"We're happy," said Patti Whitney-Wise, the executive director of the Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force and the advocate leading the charge to protect TANF from budget cuts. "We're pleased that some of the biggest holes were (filled)."

Added back to the program were \$12.6 million to preserve the 60-month time limit that families can receive the program's monthly cash grant. That grant tops out at \$506 per month for a family of four or more.

Gov. John Kitzhaber's recommended budget called for reducing TANF's budget by \$67 million and reducing the time limit to 18 months, which would have affected 7,000 Oregon families.

"That was extremely bad public policy," says Rep. Tina Kotek (D-Portland), who has championed TANF's preservation.

Following the governor's budget plans to

dramatically reduce TANF, advocates immediately decried the recommendation, saying it would cause impoverished, unemployed and vulnerable families with dependent children to become homeless.

They quickly formed an alliance and strenuously lobbied legislators to restore the program's funding. "We did quite a bit of running around," Whitney-Wise says.

Two million dollars were restored to TANF's Family Supports and Connections program, which helps parents acquire better parenting and life skills, and \$10 million was restored to serve clients of the Jobs Opportunity and Basic Skills (JOBS) program who are considered "Tier II" clients, people who are not quite ready to enter the workforce.

May's revenue forecast projected that Oregon would have an additional \$129 million in its general fund for the 2011-2013 biennium. \$105 million was used to reduce cuts to human services programs, including TANF. "There were a lot of severe cuts," Whitney-Wise says.

Twenty-six million dollar were also taken from the Department of Human Services' Employment Related Day Care program by reducing the number of caseloads in the program from 11,000 to 9,000. That too is an unfortunate cut, Whitney-Wise says, but Gov. Kitzhaber is said to be looking for additional funding for the program.

The changes to TANF will be in effect for the upcoming biennium, July 2011 to July 2013.

But steep cuts were made, and there are program and services that will be eliminated for the biennium: a benefit for people applying to receive Social Security Disability insurance is being eliminated, as is the post-TANF payment of \$50 per month for families who left the TANF program as a

result of finding work.

Support services to people participating in the JOBS program are also being severely cut, and people who are not considered immediately able to enter the work force will no longer be able to access support services such as child care, mental health treatment, parenting and life skills training, etc.

"All the preventive and tailored programs

less services people get, they more they risk losing their children," to the foster care system, she says.

TANF is a program reserved for the poorest of Oregon's poor. It provides a cash benefit for individuals or couples with dependent children to help cover their basic needs while they participate in job training programs, educational programs, and other programs to help them re-enter the work

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REP. TINA KOTEK
D-PORTLAND

to meet families at their individual needs won't be there," Kotek says. "It's more of a one-size-fits-all program."

The impacts on families will be huge," she says, calling the support programs essential to making TANF work. "There are families in financial crisis. And there are families in financial, emotional and other crises," Kotek says.

Whitney-Wise says the lack of support services will profoundly effect parents' abilities to not only be good parents to their children, but also to reduce the barriers stopping them from entering the workforce.

"They're not going to get the services to get rid of those barriers," Whitney Wise says.

Whitney-Wise says the changes make TANF a "very stripped down program" and she fears that people will stay on TANF longer.

"The biggest concern we have is that the

force and become self-sufficient. TANF clients stay in the program for an average of 24 months.

The number of two-parent families in TANF has increased dramatically since the start of the recession, at 330 percent since 2007. Overall demand has increased by 57.3 percent.

The TANF budget's next step is to the full Joint Ways and Means Committee before it can go to the House and Senate floors for a vote. "The TANF budget is still very fragile," Kotek warns.

This coming week, a notice from the Department of Human Services about changes to the the Jobs Opportunity and Basic Skills (JOBS) program will be sent to families on TANF detailing the cuts becoming effective on June 30.

"It will tell them what they're not getting," Kotek says. "It will be very isolating for a lot of families."

Homeless figures across Oregon jump nearly 30 percent

BY ALISON MCINTOSH
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Homelessness has increased in Oregon again. The State of Oregon Department of Housing and Community Services released the annual Point In Time Counts in late May, showing homelessness has increased 29 percent since the count was conducted in 2009, despite federal stimulus funds designed to prevent increases in homelessness due to the recession.

The report is a compilation of a count conducted each year across the United States, required by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The report counts families, children and individuals staying in shelters, on the street, in cars and other places which aren't providing a safe or stable place to call home.

"In Oregon, we believe everyone needs a place to call home. As we work together to solve the current budget crisis, the Legislature needs to prioritize providing basic needs to those most impacted by the

ongoing recession and should consider an increase to the Emergency Housing Account," said Janet Byrd, chair of the Housing Alliance. "The ongoing recession, high unemployment and continued wave of foreclosures in Oregon continues to make it more difficult for hard working Oregonians to find a safe, decent and affordable place to call home. Far too many of our friends, neighbors and children are experiencing homelessness today in Oregon."

As the recession continues, more and more Oregon families find themselves homeless for the first time.

"We saw increases in homelessness despite an infusion of federal stimulus funds designed to prevent this very situation," said Sharon Miller, executive director of Neighbor Impact in Redmond.

"Hardworking people should be able to afford housing and still have enough money for groceries and other basic necessities," said Jackie Schad, executive director of ACCESS, Inc in Jackson County. "Too many families across the state can't afford a safe,

stable place to call home. We're calling on the State Legislature to increase funds for emergency rent assistance to help protect families and children affected by the recession."

In 2009, as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, Oregon received \$15 million to be spent between 2009 and 2011. These funds were to be used to help people either prevent or end their homelessness through short-term rental assistance. The money was quickly and effectively used in Oregon for this purpose, but despite these additional funds, the need far outweighed the availability of these funds. Oregon has a similar fund, the Emergency Housing Account, which is slated to receive \$5.8 million in general funds according to the governor's requested budget. Increases to the Emergency Housing Account would go directly towards preventing and ending homelessness throughout Oregon.

Note: Street Roots asked the city for comment on the recent report. Here's what

spokesperson for the Portland Housing Bureau had to say: "The Portland Housing Bureau and the Multnomah County Department of County Human Services coordinated the work of hundreds of local agencies and volunteers who conducted the local 2011 one night count of people experiencing homelessness. Though we submitted our preliminary results to OHCS to contribute to this statewide data, we are carefully analyzing our data to better understand our local picture of homelessness. We expect to issue a detailed report by the end of June."

An earlier report released by the Housing Alliance and the National Low Income Housing Coalition showed that the cost of renting an apartment in Oregon has continued to increase. The average fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Oregon is \$822 – a number that has increased 35 percent since 2000.

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