

# HARMFUL WORKFIRST CUTS WORSEN WASHINGTON'S HOMELESSNESS AND MENTAL HEALTH CRISES

*To promote child and family well-being, lawmakers should roll back cuts to WorkFirst that increase hardship for families who face barriers to work.*

WorkFirst, Washington's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), is a crucial support that protects low-income families with children facing crises like homelessness and navigating barriers like mental illness. The program's cash assistance and supportive services create a critical bridge to stability.

However, Washington state policymakers cut the WorkFirst program through inflexible time limits and sanction policies. These cuts have resulted in extreme hardship, including worsening homelessness and mental health problems for families with children. These harsh restrictions are part of a series of policy changes implemented over the last decade, driven by efforts to cut spending in the wake of the Great Recession. New data from the Department of Social and Health Services show:

## TIME LIMITS AND SANCTIONS PUSH HOMELESS FAMILIES OFF ASSISTANCE

- Between July 2017 and June 2018, more than a third (36%) of families who lost WorkFirst benefits due to time limits or sanction policies were homeless at the time.<sup>1</sup>
- This includes nearly 2,000 homeless children. Among those removed due to sanctions, 20% of homeless children were completely unsheltered at the time of benefit loss.<sup>2</sup>
- The loss of WorkFirst dramatically reduces a low-income family's ability to secure a safe, stable place to live – especially given the critical shortage of affordable housing in our state.

## TIME LIMITS AND SANCTIONS HARM FAMILIES FACING MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

- Since 2015, an average of seven out of ten of heads of household removed from WorkFirst due to time limits have mental health needs, and nearly half (48%) live with serious mental illness.<sup>3</sup>
- Approximately two in five of time-limited heads of household have a need for substance use disorder treatment.<sup>4</sup>
- For parents and caregivers whose mental and behavioral health needs have been identified as a barrier to work in their Individual Responsibility Plan, losing WorkFirst can mean getting cut off from essential supportive services. This disrupts treatment and alienates parents from necessary healthcare, with dangerous consequences for families.

## HARSH PROGRAM CUTS SINCE 2007 ARE PUSHING FAMILIES OFF WORKFIRST:

- **Narrowed extensions to the federal 60-month lifetime limit** make it so that families in crisis can lose benefits, even when following program rules.
- **Harsher full-family sanctions** penalize the entire family unit – including children – when a parent is unable to meet requirements.
- **Quicker sanctions** shorten the period of time a family has to come back into compliance.
- **Long "lock out" periods** make it more difficult for families to participate in work activities and come back into compliance.
- **Severe mandatory disqualification penalties** automatically bar families from the program when they have faced barriers to compliance in the past.
- **Mandatory orientations** required in the application process can prevent families in crisis from getting benefits.

More than  
**1 IN 3**  
families penalized last  
fiscal year were homeless<sup>1</sup>

Nearly  
**2,000**  
homeless children were  
penalized last fiscal year<sup>2</sup>

**70%**  
of penalized parents  
face mental illness<sup>3</sup>

## FOR LOW-INCOME CHILDREN, WORKFIRST PENALTIES DEEPEN TRAUMA THAT CAN REVERBERATE OVER A LIFETIME

For children, economic hardship, homelessness, and living with someone experiencing mental illness or misusing alcohol or drugs, constitute adverse childhood experiences (ACES). Extensive research has shown that ACES cause toxic stress that can have ripple effects throughout a child's life, including worse physical, mental, and emotional health outcomes in adulthood.<sup>5</sup> Because WorkFirst time limits and sanction policies disproportionately affect families experiencing trauma, they are likely to deepen the negative consequences linked to ACES. Fortunately, state lawmakers have an opportunity to change these policies to better protect children and their families, especially in times of crisis.

### POLICY SOLUTIONS

This legislative session, state lawmakers should implement fixes to WorkFirst to address hardship among families experiencing homelessness and mental illness. The following solutions would strengthen WorkFirst's ability to mitigate the harm of deep poverty:

- Eliminate full family sanctions, so that children and dependents are not penalized when a head of household can't meet work requirements.
- Eliminate permanent disqualifications and instead allow restoration of benefits upon compliance.
- Integrate mandatory orientation content into the client's comprehensive evaluation and ensure that families are not denied benefits because they were unable to attend an orientation session.
- Allow parents who are "playing by the rules" and meeting the requirements of their Individual Responsibility Plans to receive extensions on the time limit.

*"When I was sanctioned, I remember immediately feeling overwhelming distress. 'How am I going to provide food or diapers for my kids this month?' I ended up visiting every food bank I could... I felt embarrassed and at my lowest having to beg for help... I ended up going to a church hopelessly trying to get food for my kids who hadn't eaten all day.*

*I was starving too. I didn't know what to do. It sucks when you're a single parent trying to make ends meet not even for myself but for my kids. I can starve myself for a couple days as long as my kids eat. Literally, I've had to do that."*

**– Mother and WorkFirst recipient from Everett, WA**

### WHAT IS WORKFIRST/TANF?

When families with dependent children fall on hard times, they turn to WorkFirst, Washington's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, as a lifeline. WorkFirst is an essential work support that helps families meet basic needs, address barriers, and connect with employment. When faced with crises like job loss, a medical emergency, or domestic violence, WorkFirst can help families keep the lights on, afford bus fare or gas, and keep diapers and other essentials stocked – acting as a shield against the traumatic effects of poverty.



<sup>1</sup> B&PC analysis of DSHS data on TANF recipient households terminated for reaching 60-month time limit and/or due to non-compliance sanctions, SFY 2018. Homeless includes people who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, or are living in emergency or domestic violence shelter, or couch surfing. <sup>2</sup> Ibid. Completely unsheltered includes people who are homeless without housing, reporting that they lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence and do not have a place to stay. <sup>3</sup> B&PC analysis of DSHS data on head of household TANF recipients terminated for reaching 60-month time limit. Figure is a 3-year average of SFY 2015, 2016, and 2017 data. In SFY 2017 alone, 74% of head of household TANF recipients removed due to time limits had mental health needs. Mental health need includes people who in the 24 months prior to case closure had a diagnosis of mental illness, filled a prescription for an antipsychotic, antimania, antidepressant, anti-anxiety, or ADHD medication, or received mental health or behavioral health rehabilitation services. <sup>4</sup> Ibid. <sup>5</sup> See for example: Child Trends (2014), [https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Brief-adverse-childhood-experiences\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Brief-adverse-childhood-experiences_FINAL.pdf); SAMHSA (n.d.), <https://www.samhsa.gov/capt/practicing-effective-prevention/prevention-behavioral-health/adverse-childhood-experiences>.