

January 19, 2021

To: Members of the Washington State House Housing, Human Services, and Veterans Committee

From: Washington State Budget & Policy Center

Re: Testimony in Support of HB 1151

To Chair Peterson and members of the Committee,

The Washington State Budget & Policy Center, a research organization working to build a just and prosperous future for all Washingtonians, submits this written testimony in support of HB 1151.

Programs that provide cash and food assistance help safeguard the health and well-being of Washington communities, and extend a critical lifeline of support to people and families who are struggling to meet their basic needs. As COVID-19 continues to lay bare structural inequities across our state and nation, hundreds of thousands of households throughout Washington are struggling to put food on the table and keep a roof overhead. Too many Washingtonians were stretched thin even before the crisis, and the recession has disrupted the tenuous ways that many people and families were covering the basics.

HB 1151 takes important, modest steps to strengthen some of Washington's anti-poverty programs at this critical time, and the Budget & Policy Center would like to highlight our support of the following components in particular:

- **Strengthening the Consolidated Emergency Assistance Program (CEAP) & Disaster Cash Assistance Program (DCAP):** Direct cash assistance is a powerful antidote to economic insecurity, providing people and families needed flexibility to meet their unique needs – ranging from medical expenses to a car repair. Programs that provide cash assistance are also powerful tools for economic recovery, as they keep dollars flowing in local communities. The duration of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic downturn demonstrate clearly that our state's current policy – which limits emergency cash assistance to once in a 12 month period – is insufficient to meet the challenges of this moment as well as the reality of the everyday emergencies (like health crises and domestic violence) that people across our state regularly confront. Investing in additional CEAP and DCAP support for people who are excluded from accessing other programs – especially undocumented immigrants – is critical to ensuring that no one is left out of our state's recovery.
- **Modernizing the standard of need:** Washington state has not meaningfully updated its need standard since the original market basket study was conducted thirty years ago. Household expenses have changed dramatically over that time, and the state's practice of updating the standard by inflation alone has chronically underestimated the increase in the cost of basic needs. The current study fails to account for modern necessities like internet and cell phone, and excludes child care – which eats up a significant percentage of family income, often rivaling the cost of rent. Updating the standard of need to reflect what it actually takes for people and families to meet their basic needs and significant regional variation in costs is an important first step. *In order for this to have a material impact in Washingtonians' lives, however, public benefit levels (like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) must be linked to a percentage of this standard.* Current Washington state TANF benefits amount to **less than 24% of even the outdated need standard** – leaving kids and families with a fraction of the estimated baseline

cost of living. Keeping cash assistance artificially low reduces the efficacy of our state's anti-poverty programs and harms people and families who don't receive adequate support to pay rent, buy groceries, and afford diapers and other basics.

We urge this committee to pass HB 1151 and to work to strengthen key public benefit programs that will help pave the way to a more equitable economic recovery and help all Washingtonians thrive. Thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration.