

To: Members of the Washington State House Housing, Human Services, and Veterans Committee
From: Washington State Budget & Policy Center
Re: Testimony in Support of House Bill 2048
Date: February 1, 2022

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 House Bill 2048.

When families fall on hard times, they need support to cover the basics – food on the table, a roof overhead, diapers and the other essentials kids need to be safe and healthy. Programs that provide cash 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.

House Bill 2048 will avert additional harm to families with the lowest incomes in our state by extending policy fixes to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) / WorkFirst program that were put in place in response to COVID-19.

I want to share three key overall points of context that inform our support for this legislation:

1. First, cash assistance to families struggling to make ends meet can improve children's long-term outcomes while also providing parents with the cash they need to afford basic necessities such as rent, utilities, personal hygiene products, and school supplies.

A substantial body of research suggests that direct, flexible cash reduces poverty, increases economic mobility, and improves health and well-being for adults and children.¹ Most recently, an evaluation of the Baby First Years cash payment program found that additional cash altered infants' brain activity in ways that suggest stronger cognitive development.²

2. Second, the design of the TANF program has been shaped by anti-Black racism and sexism in ways that has limited the programs effectiveness at helping families.³ In particular, restrictive and punitive policies like time limits, family caps, and increased work requirements are rooted in ideas about who deserves and doesn't deserve support that is deeply racialized.
3. And third, in the wake of the Great Recession, Washington state policymakers made steep cuts to TANF – reducing our total, inflation-adjusted spending by more than \$330 million between 2008 and 2019. In 2008, Washington served about half of all families living in poverty in its TANF program, but by 2019, we served just one third.⁴ This has had grave and costly impacts to Washington families and to our state – exacerbating our homelessness crisis, deepening racial inequity, and failing to reduce deep poverty even during a long period of economic growth.

¹ Summary of selected research: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-tax/income-support-associated-with-improved-health-outcomes-for-children-many>

² Summary in the New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/24/us/politics/child-tax-credit-brain-function.html>; Original research: <https://www.pnas.org/content/119/5/e2115649119>

³ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/family-income-support/tanf-policies-reflect-racist-legacy-of-cash-assistance>

⁴ https://budgetandpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Reinvest-in-TANF_2020-Brief-update.pdf

The time limit policy put in place during the Great Recession undermined the program's ability to reach families in need, and caused particular harm to Black, Indigenous, and families of color. In 2019, 54% of heads of households cut off TANF due to time limits were unstably housed in the prior year, 78% needed mental health support, and 51% had a serious mental illness.

Data from DSHS also showed that the time limit policy has had a racially disproportionate impact - *Black people make up about 30% of those cut off of support, but only 19% of the caseload overall*. These families are held back by barriers rooted in structural racism like employment discrimination and reduced access to higher education, which undermine their ability to secure a pathway out of poverty. The experience of the past few years has shown that hardship time limit extensions have helped mitigate this racial disparity.

House Bill 2048 builds on the work of the legislature over the past few years to undo harmful policies from the great recession, reduces racial disparities, and ensures families have what they need to get back on their feet.

The commonsense policy changes included in HB 2048 are set to expire in June 2022. Unless the legislature acts this year, kids and parents who are shouldering the most severe impacts of the economic and public health crisis will lose even the very modest benefit they are receiving through TANF.

Hundreds of thousands of households throughout Washington are struggling to put food on the table and keep a roof overhead. We urge you not to let this policy expire.

Thanks for your time.