NETWORK Connection
PEOPLE LOBBYING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE • THIRD QUARTER 2010

Watercolor by WVSA ARTs connection artist, see page 2.

Michael Tuteon

TANF Tested: Lives of Families in Poverty during the Recession

dear members

In this issue of *Connection* you will read the summary of more than six months of work to prepare for the reauthorization of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. We are publishing our report in this format to attempt to get it into the hands of the most people possible in the most accessible way.

This project has been a GRAND partnership with many of our members "on the ground" around the country and our DC staff. We know we are at our best when we staff bring the real life experience of people to the DC reality. This study is a great example of that happening. It is only because of you, our members, that we are able to "bridge the Beltway." You are essential to our advocacy!

At the same time, we have once again discovered that the issue of "poverty" is out of vogue. We are told that Congress is more interested in budget deficit than in the needs of ordinary people. Only if you our members and our nation's voters speak up will we ever be able to make a dent in this election year posturing.

So know our great gratitude for our real and active NETWORK! Together we can call our country to the common good—essential values in our faith and the Constitution! We the people can stand up for the needs around us. We are grateful for our partnership. THANK YOU!

Simone Campbell, SSS

Contents

TANF Tested: Lives of Families in Poverty during the Recession

By Sarah Carey, NETWORK Associate, and NETWORK Staff

Edited by Stephanie Niedringhaus, NETWORK Communications Coordinator

We wish to express our sincere gratitude to the following for their generous support of the TANF Watch Project:

- *Dominican Sisters, Springfield, IL*
- *Incarnate Word Foundation, Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, St. Louis, MO*
- *SC Ministry Foundation, Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, OH*
- *Sinsinawa Dominicans, Sinsinawa, WI*
- *Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Nazareth, KY*

NETWORK
A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby

NETWORK—a Catholic leader in the global movement for justice and peace—educates, organizes and lobbies for economic and social transformation.

Third Quarter 2010—Vol. 38, No. 3
NETWORK *Connection* • ISSN 0199-5723
Published quarterly by NETWORK
PHONE 202-347-9797 FAX 202-347-9864
E-MAIL: connection@networklobby.org
WEB SITE: www.networklobby.org

POSTMASTER: SEND ADDRESS CHANGES TO
NETWORK • 25 E Street NW, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20001

Annual dues: $50/$60 international.

COVER: Michael Tutson is an artist at *ARTs connection*/WVSA's Employment Training Program, an arts-based program that develops vocational, social and life-management skills for DC youth and adults who receive special educational services and/or have a learning and/or emotional disability. Michael's artistic talents have grown significanty during his five years with the program, and he is among the top-selected artists for commissioned work. At home Michael loves to cook and prepare food for his family. At WVSA he helps frame artwork and prepare for gallery events.

WVSA ARTs connection provides multiple creative environments, opportunities and experiences for children and adults through arts-infused educational and vocational programs.

TANF Tested: Lives of Families in Poverty during the Recession

Executive Summary

The recent recession severely impacted many families in the U.S., particularly those whose financial stability was already precarious. While government programs provided some assistance to people who had lost their homes or livelihoods, families at the very bottom of the economic ladder did not receive sufficient help from one of the major programs meant just for them—Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

According to the Center on Law and Social Policy, the TANF block grant has declined by 27% due to inflation and the fact that states are using the funds to support other critical needs for low-income families, draining money from actual TANF programs. In our 2001 report, NETWORK reported that TANF would need additional funding during an economic recession, and the past two years have given us a great deal of information about how TANF actually functions during a downturn. From December 2007 to December 2009, the national unemployment rate more than doubled (from 4.8% to 9.7%), while, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, TANF caseloads only increased by 13% (and even decreased in some states).

In the years since TANF was created in 1996, NETWORK has evaluated its effectiveness in lifting our nation's most vulnerable families from poverty to self-sufficiency. We have interviewed thousands of families receiving help from social service agencies to learn more about their day-to-day experiences. Previous reports based on our surveys appeared in 1999 and 2001, during times of relative prosperity. Despite economic growth in the nation during the 1990s, we found considerable suffering and poverty. This is our third report, one that comes at a time when the U.S. is just coming out of the most severe recession since the Great Depression, and when unemployment rates remain stubbornly high.

From February to March 2010, more than 800 interviews were conducted at 70 social service agencies, including food pantries, family centers, homeless shelters and multi-service organizations, in 20 states and Washington, D.C. Adults who were interviewed were members of low-income families that included 1300 children. Survey instruments were designed and analyzed by Dr. Douglas Porpora, a sociologist and professor at Drexel University, in collaboration with NETWORK staff and service providers, and administered by agency staff and volunteers at the individual agencies.

Key Findings from NETWORK's 2010 TANF Watch Project

TANF and similar programs fail to help enough people who struggle in poverty.

Despite its good intentions, it is clear that TANF has many shortcomings, some that have remained consistent throughout the past 15 years and others that became more evident during the recent economic downturn. Particularly

DAVID MATHIES

problematic: the low percentage of eligible families that actually receive TANF assistance and the high percentage of families that struggle financially even when they move from TANF to work. TANF has not reached all who need it, particularly during the recession, nor has it been successful in helping enough families rise above poverty.

TANF's "Work First" emphasis is especially problematic during periods of high unemployment and low wages.

Although many people were able to find work soon after the 1996 welfare reform law passed, TANF has been less successful in this regard in recent years. Families within NETWORK's current study faced high unemployment during the economic recession, making it difficult for them to comply with TANF's work requirements. Over two-thirds of respondents were not working at the time of the survey, and one-fourth reported being laid off or fired in the past year. For many respondents who had jobs, their pay was not enough to meet all their basic needs.

Despite SNAP and other food programs, too many people struggle to pay for enough food to feed themselves and their families.

Suffering caused by poverty is especially evident when so many survey respondents cannot afford sufficient food and must turn to food pantries and other sources for help. In fact, we found more evidence of food insecurity this time than during our previous surveys. In the past 12 months, almost three-fourths of respondents sometimes experienced times when they ran out of food and slightly less than one-third described themselves as often short on food. Fortunately, many respondents received assistance from the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which has grown during the economic downturn, but it is clear that is not enough. To help fill the gap, 81% of social service organizations surveyed saw an increase in clientele in the past two years.

> "The Welfare-to-Work program does not seem to be successfully preparing individuals to develop the necessary skills in order to become self-reliant or employable… I believe that the entire system needs to be evaluated and revised to better meet individuals' needs." —*Program Director at a transitional housing center in Baltimore, MD*

Limited access to education and quality job training prevents many low-income people from finding jobs that lift them out of poverty.

In our increasingly skills-based economy, education is becoming more necessary to secure living-wage employment. TANF, however, places too little emphasis on education to provide this much-needed boost. Within the TANF Watch Project sample, one-third had not finished high school, and over one-fourth had only completed high school or attained their GED. Fully 40% of respondents reported that insufficient education and job training were barriers they encountered in seeking employment. Additionally, only 31% of TANF recipients reported that they had received job training, an aspect of the program that should receive far more emphasis if participants are expected to find employment.

Many people in poverty face serious barriers that hinder their ability to secure employment and government help.

Families in poverty often face multiple challenges when seeking financial stability. Roughly 40% of respondents identified poor transportation and child care as the most critical obstacles to finding and keeping jobs, while many stated that there are not enough jobs "for people like me." Many people in poverty, including TANF recipients, have individual or multiple disabilities. Dealing with domestic violence and prison records are not uncommon barriers. Individuals often find it difficult to navigate current assistance systems because of language or other barriers. Spanish-speaking respondents reported particularly difficult language and education challenges. And the number of people eligible for various kinds of assistance but unable to get what they need continues to be sizable.

Key Recommendations Based on our Findings

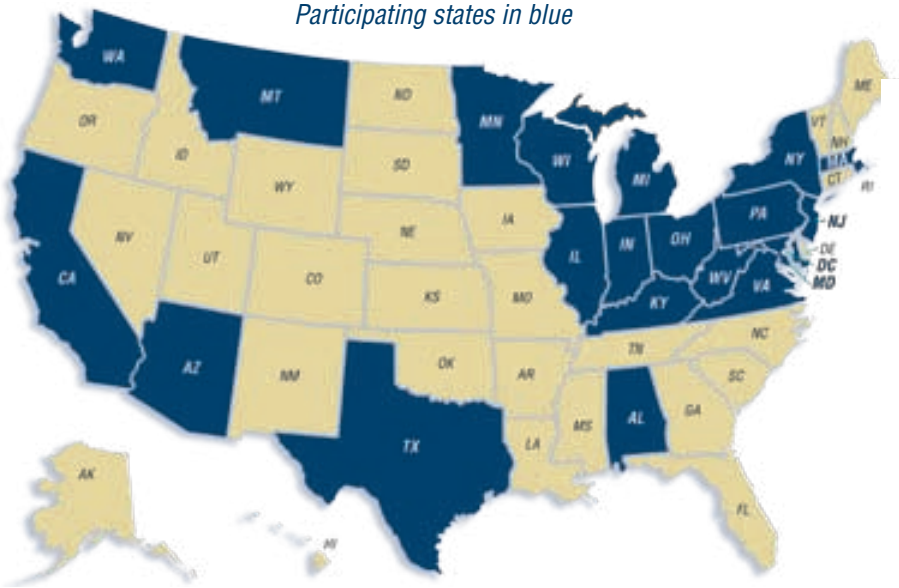
- **Measure of Success.** The primary goal of TANF should not be to reduce caseloads, but to reduce poverty and improve child wellbeing. States should be given substantial incentives to lift more children and families out of poverty.
- **Improved Coordination of Services and Interagency Collaboration.** Agencies at federal, state and local levels must improve their collaboration so that individuals and families will be able to navigate more coordinated, less complex systems and receive the help they need.
- **Investment in Human Needs Programs.** Funding of these programs is currently insufficient to meet increased needs, especially during an economic downturn. In order to create effective pathways out of poverty, this problem needs to be resolved at various levels.
- **Subsidized Jobs.** States should be encouraged to participate in subsidized jobs programs and continue to build on successful programs that come from the TANF Emergency Fund.
- **Help for Non-custodial Parents.** Non-custodial parents need better access to job training and education to help their families, and families need programs promoting responsible fatherhood.
- **More Help for People Facing Job Barriers.** Additional help is needed for those facing multiple barriers (sick child, mental illness, physical disability, domestic abuse, etc.). Further, the disproportionately negative effects of welfare reform on Latinos should be addressed by providing increased access to education (including English training), job training and support services, and the fact that lawfully present immigrants do not have full access to benefits continues to be a problem.
- **Education.** States should be encouraged to create effective pathways out of poverty through education for their TANF recipients, and realistic education goals are needed.
- **Five-year Time Limit.** The five-year lifetime limit for assistance is unrealistic for many—and many states have even shorter time limits. Greater flexibility is needed, especially when unemployment is above 5%.

TANF Tested: Lives of Families in Poverty during the Recession

Introduction

The NETWORK Education Program, a sister organization to NETWORK, A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby, has a long history of educating government officials and the general populace about issues that affect people in poverty. Because NETWORK members include thousands of people and religious communities with experience working directly with people in need, we are in a uniquely strong position to gather data about real-life experiences. Since our founding in 1971, NETWORK has worked to ensure that all people have fair access to what they need to live lives of dignity, based on the Catholic social justice tradition and Gospel mandate to act for justice. This report is one tool to meet that goal.

Participating states in blue



Project Overview

The TANF Watch Project is third in a series of studies that have tracked the effects of welfare reform in the past 15 years. Our previous reports, published in 1999 and 2001, examined the transition from AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependant Children) to TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), finding that many people continued to live in persistent poverty after the 1996 welfare reform. Each study was based on individual interviews conducted at private social service agencies, including food pantries, homeless shelters and other service centers. Our goal was to learn about the lived experiences of people receiving help there.

Survey instruments were designed by Dr. Douglas Porpora, a sociologist, author and professor at Drexel University, in consultation with NETWORK staff and social service providers, and administered by agency staff and volunteers. Up to 50 interviews were conducted at each of 70 agencies. Facilities also completed questionnaires about their program characteristics and changes during the economic downturn.

Profile of Survey Respondents

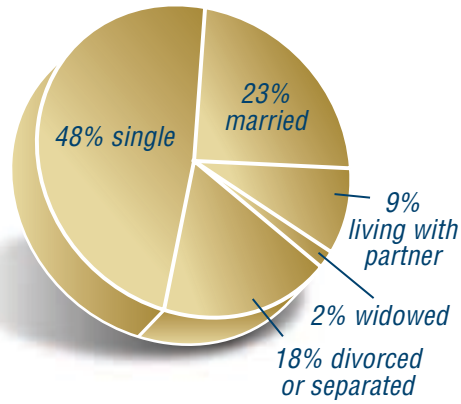
For the current survey, adult members of 808 families that included 1300 children were interviewed in 20 states and the District of Columbia.

Gender & Family Structure

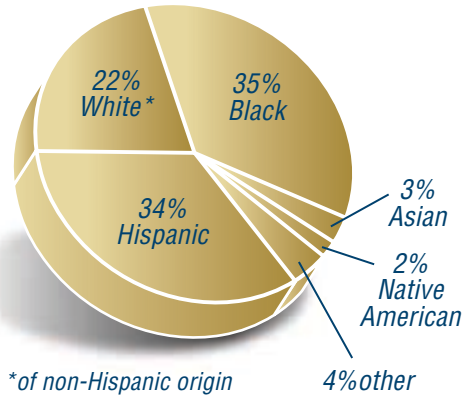
Eighty-nine percent of survey respondents were women, and 92% of these respondents had their own children under the age of 18 as dependants. Six percent cared for grandchildren and 2% for unrelated children. Of the survey respondents, 32% were married or living with a partner, and 48% identified as single. In addition:

- 51% of men surveyed were married, as opposed to 19% of women.
- 42% of White respondents were married vs.18% of Black respondents.
- 63% of those interviewed in Spanish were married, as opposed to 25% of English speakers.

Marital Status



Racial/Ethnic Composition



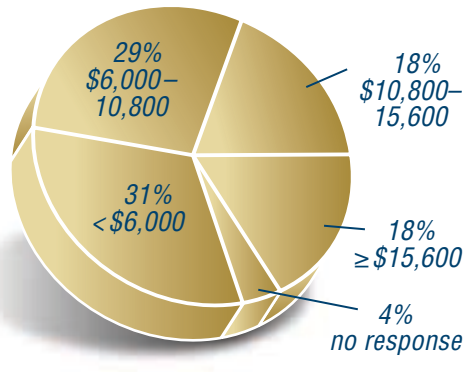
*of non-Hispanic origin

Slightly more than one-third of survey respondents (35%) identified as Black and another one-third (34%) identified as Hispanic. Twenty-two percent were non-Hispanic White.

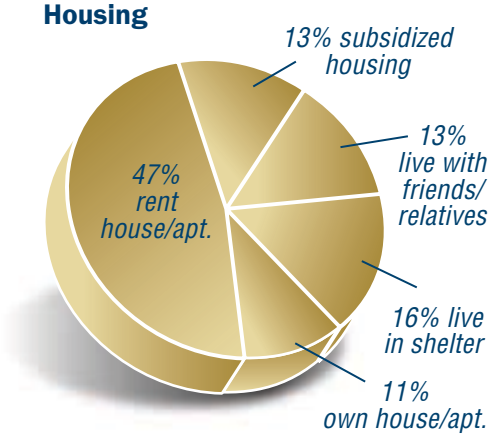
Income

Most families, which included a median number of two children per household, subsisted in deep poverty, with 31% reporting incomes of less than $6,000 per year and 29% in the $6,000–10,800 range.

Household Income per Year

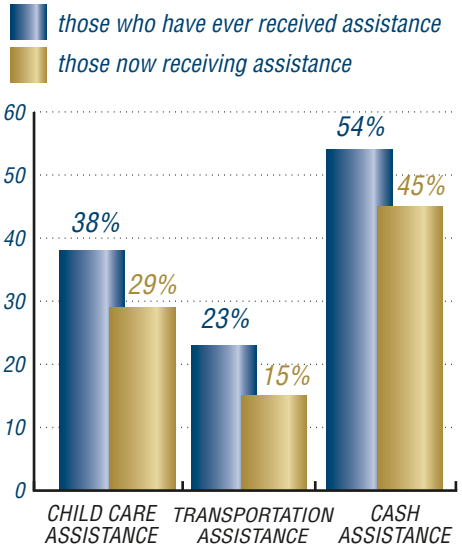


Housing



Almost half (47%) of respondents rent their home or apartment, and an unsettling 16% live in a shelter. Additionally, one-fourth (25%) reported that they had moved in the past six months because it cost too much to stay where they were.

TANF Recipients



Despite evidence of severe poverty, relatively small percentages have received or are now receiving help through the TANF program.

Why TANF Matters to NETWORK

TANF came into being through *The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996* (PRWORA), also known as the welfare reform law. It was designed to be part of the national safety net, providing block grants to states, territories and tribes for services, benefits and administrative costs for low-income families with dependants.

"People who took the survey just accepted that it is part of life to have to go to food pantries and soup kitchens to survive. They know that TANF will NOT cover all their expenses, and that they need to be creative to make ends meet. Many of them sacrifice not eating, eating less and not eating balanced meals to stretch whatever they have. No one should have to go hungry in this country, but they do!" —*Multi-service social service agency, Bronx, NY*

Stated objectives of TANF:

- Provide support for low-income families for care of children in their homes
- Limit welfare dependence by promoting employment and marriage
- Strengthen the formation of stable two-parent families
- Decrease the quantity of out-of-wedlock pregnancies

States receive funds as fixed block grants, and use of those funds varies greatly among states. Key uses include income (cash) assistance, child care assistance, job training, transportation assistance and other services.

NETWORK has monitored TANF's effectiveness since it began. We have been especially concerned about how well TANF supported our nation's safety net.

A Little Background

AFDC, predecessor to TANF, was designed to support poor children whose one parent was absent, deceased, unemployed or disabled. States were given unlimited entitlement funds to administer cash assistance to all families meeting program requirements. After complaints that families abused AFDC funds and a concern over the legislation's lack of structure to promote self-sufficiency, the Clinton Administration led the redesign of the program in 1996.

TANF eliminated the open-ended federal entitlement that existed under AFDC. A five-year lifetime limit on the receipt of benefits was also implemented. Work requirements were instituted to implement a "Work First" employment approach; noncompliance with work and other requirements could lead to sanctions (reduction or elimination of a family's cash grant). Because of these changes and backed by a strong economy, many families left welfare rolls in the late 1990s. In recent years, however, employment opportunities have become scarcer and fewer people have utilized TANF as a resource, due in part to difficult requirements, diversion programs, limited support for people with barriers to employment, and other issues. Cash benefits are also very low.

TANF was reauthorized in 2005 under the Deficit Reduction Act, after a series of short-term extensions following its scheduled 2002 reauthorization date. Reauthorization did little to improve support for children in poverty. During the economic downturn starting in 2007, TANF caseloads did not rise enough to meet the increased need. TANF objectives to increase job participation proved challenging as unemployment continued to rise and job availability—particularly for living-wage positions—declined.

The TANF Emergency Fund

The Emergency Contingency Fund of $2 billion was included in the original law to provide states with additional federal funds of up to 20% of their block grant amount during a recession or time of rising unemployment or higher food stamp costs.

In 2007, for the first time since it was created, states started to qualify for help from the fund. By 2009, a new emergency fund was established in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) because of fears that the original would be depleted. The newly-created emergency fund provides an 80% reimbursement to states for increases in TANF-related expenditures in specified areas, including subsidized employment. In total, states estimate they will place more than 200,000 needy adults and youth in subsidized jobs before the fund expires on September 30, 2010; many of those jobs will be lost unless Congress extends it.

TANF Reauthorization

The basic TANF block grant program is also due for reauthorization by September 30, 2010, but it is likely that Congress will simply grant a short-term extension to allow for a more thorough analysis and to wait for a better economic climate. A comprehensive reauthorization process should include examination of many issues, including state funding, the efficacy of TANF in the recession, and the efficiency of welfare-to-work programs generally.

Chapter 1

NETWORK's 15-Year Review of TANF

When TANF first came into being after President Clinton signed welfare reform into law in 1996, NETWORK began to analyze its effects and the real-life experiences of people in poverty. Our *Welfare Reform Watch Project* included three separate surveys that involved interviewing more than 3,000 patrons of soup kitchens and other private emergency facilities. Results of the first two surveys, conducted in 1997 and 1998, were published in a 1999 report entitled *Poverty amid Plenty: The Unfinished Business of Welfare Reform.* Results of a follow-up survey appeared in *Welfare Reform: How Do We Define Success?* (2001).

A decade later, we find that much of what we observed in our original surveys continues to be true. The biggest difference between now and then is that our nation has just passed through the most severe recession since the Great Depression. Unemployment rates remain high, and people struggling at the bottom rungs of the economic ladder still find it extremely difficult to rise out of poverty.

Although our four separate surveys involved somewhat different demographics, all those interviewed had one major commonality: poverty that forced them to turn for help to emergency facilities like soup kitchens and free clinics with whom NETWORK had either direct or indirect connections. This was true during good economic times, and even truer during lean economic times.

Some Key Findings from NETWORK's Reports

Poverty amid Plenty: The Unfinished Business of Welfare Reform (1999)

- **Less government assistance** than before 1996. Despite their poverty, only 33% of those interviewed received TANF benefits in 1997.
- **Struggle to meet basic needs as people left welfare rolls** for jobs that provided little economic security. People with jobs were almost as likely to report lack of food for their children as unemployed families (22% and 25%, respectively).
- **Dramatic rise in the percentage of people** who neither received TANF nor income from jobs—from 52% in 1997 to 79% in 1998.

SEAN WARREN

Welfare Reform: How Do We Define Success? (2001)

- **More jobs.** Some survey respondents benefited from TANF's "Work First" strategy, with an increase of employment rates from 21% in 1999 to 35% in 2001.
- **Insufficient incomes.** Many people had incomes far below the poverty line, with 47% reporting annual incomes of less than $8,500.
- **Unrealistic poverty line.** Many people with incomes above the poverty threshold were still hungry and did not have basic necessities. 34% lived above the poverty line and still sought services from emergency facilities.
- **Many people living without employment or the support of public benefits.** 82% of these people lived in poverty.
- **Employment and marriage.** Jobs and marriage, two goals of welfare reform—did not necessarily lift people out of poverty, and families turned to emergency facilities to meet basic needs. 37% of respondents in social service facilities were married or partnered with at least one family member employed.
- **Struggles of the Latino population.** 40% of Latinos had never received cash assistance, and Latinos had higher unemployment and less education.

TANF Tested: Lives of People in Poverty during the Recession (2010)

- **Poverty during the recession.** 50% of respondents had incomes of $500-700/month ($6,000-8,400/year), similar to the 47% figure in our 2001 findings. Inflation, however, has affected the buying power. What could be purchased for $700 in 2000 would cost $877 today—a loss of $187 in buying power.
- **High unemployment.** Over two-thirds of those interviewed were not working, with one-fourth having been laid off or fired within the previous year.
- **Low TANF caseload even in times of recession.** Only 45% received TANF benefits at the time of the survey despite their high levels of unemployment and need.
- **Increased hunger.** Almost three-fourths of our respondents reported that they often or sometimes ran out of food because of lack of money in the past year, an increase over previous survey findings. In 1999, 43% reported having to eat fewer meals or less per meal during the previous six months.
- **Continued unstable housing.** One quarter of our respondents had moved during the previous six months.

Chapter 2

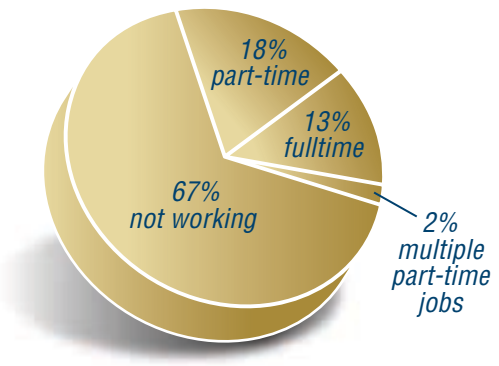
"Work First" during a Recession?

TANF has been administered with a "Work First" approach, directing TANF recipients and eligible families toward immediate employment. This approach had some success when the economy was strong, but there have been problems during economic downturns. High unemployment during the recession of 2008–09 struck many vulnerable families.

TANF recipients also face other employment obstacles, including jobs that are low-wage or part-time that leave them mired in poverty with little room for advancement. Other job barriers include domestic violence, disability, substance abuse, care of infants, and educational limitations.

Two-thirds (67%) of our survey respondents were not working at the time of the survey, and only 13% worked fulltime. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, national unemployment in May of 2010 was 9.7%. Although the recession aggravated the problem of unemployment, NETWORK's 2001 study also found that roughly two-thirds of respondents were unemployed. This indicates that those in poverty struggled prior to the recession to find stable employment and continue to do so.

Employment Status



"All of the benefits for one of our clients were cut when she started working. She has 5 children and still needed support after she started working. Her hours are not enough to support her family." —*Medical staff at a social service agency in Washington, D.C.*

"This individual (an African American mother of four) was employed as a stock clerk (at $8.00/hr) for over 90 days and was told this position would most likely lead to fulltime employment. It did not, and in fact this woman and others were let go with less than two weeks' notice." —*Program Director at a transitional housing center in Baltimore, MD*

One-fourth (26%) of all respondents had been laid off or fired in the past year.

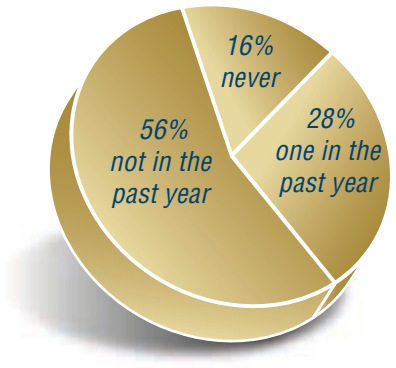
Despite TANF's goal to promote work, only 42% of respondents who had received TANF funds found a job while under the program. Among those who did, 26% reported that they lost their child care benefits, which created additional hardship.

DAVID EDWARDS

Fifty-six percent of those respondents not working have not held a fulltime job in the past year, and 40% of all respondents had one or more part-time jobs. Part-time positions may offer family flexibility, but they often do not provide enough income or benefits to feed and care for a family.

Spanish-speaking respondents were less likely to have ever had fulltime employment than English speakers—31% of the 2010 study's unemployed Spanish speakers had never held a fulltime job, as opposed to only 12% of English speakers. In NETWORK's 1999 report, 20% of Latinos were working, as opposed to 30% of Whites and 28% of Blacks.

Of those not working, percentages who previously had fulltime jobs



Among households that reported incomes of less than $8,400 per year, 60% said they were not working while 12% were working fulltime. Even those who report higher incomes and employment within our sample are turning to social service agencies to provide for their basic needs. The emphasis in TANF to place people in any type of work regardless of pay limits the program's potential to help them reach self-sufficiency. Additionally, case managers can be reluctant to encourage people to leave jobs for better ones, preferring to maintain the security of current jobs.

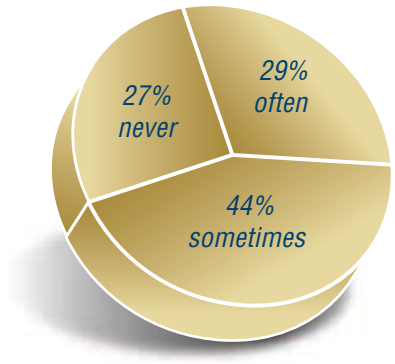
"With TANF, the expectations and obligations are high, leaving no room for you to actually succeed. Their obligations leave you with really no way to do anything else to better yourself… a lot of people including myself struggle... With TANF you are required to work so many hours a week, do the required job search, and then report to your TANF worker. All this and still try to maintain an existence with your family." —*Mother in Chicago, IL*

Chapter 3

Increased Hunger

Inability to buy food is a real issue for many survey respondents. Almost three-fourths of our respondents reported that they often or sometimes ran out of food because of lack of money in the past year. It is particularly troubling that the percentage of respondents reporting this is higher now than during our previous surveys.

Ran out of Food in the Past Year



Sixty-two percent of respondents reported that at some point during the past 12 months they could not eat balanced meals, and 21% reported that this problem occurred often. Additionally, almost half (47%) reduced their meal size or skipped meals at some point in the past year. Out of this category, 31% experienced this problem almost every month.

In comparison, 43% of respondents reported in 1999 that they had to eat fewer meals or less per meal in the most recent 6-month period due to cost.

The Spanish speakers within NETWORK's study reported greater challenges providing enough food for their families. For example, 79% of Spanish speakers sometimes could not eat balanced meals, versus 59% of English speakers. Additionally, 27% of Spanish-speaking respondents used soup kitchens or food pantries more than twice a month, while only 15% of English-speaking respondents did so.

Food Assistance

TANF responded little to the rising needs of low-income families during the recent recession. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, caseloads only increased 13% between December 2007 and December 2009 nationwide. In contrast, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) increased sharply to meet rising needs. Between December 2007 and March 2010, the number of SNAP recipients rose by 48%, serving over 40 million people.

SNAP is the largest food program in the country, but it is administered by individual states and there is some variation in eligibility guidelines and how the program is implemented. Within the program, certain populations are underrepresented (seniors, unemployed, immigrants), and less than 70% of eligible people are actually enrolled, with enrollment rates varying from state to state, according to the Food Research and Action Center.

KATYA RODIONOVA

Almost three-fourths (73%) of our survey respondents received SNAP benefits at the time of the survey, as opposed to only 45% who received TANF benefits. Seventy-five percent of respondents who received SNAP benefits have applied in the past year, potentially as a result of the economic downturn.

> "We are seeing more people who are unemployed, more men seeking help, more people seeking help for the first time… People are more desperate for help and/or have never asked for help from a social agency before." —*Staff member at food pantry in Louisville, KY*

It is important to note racial differences among our respondents. Out of those who reported no SNAP benefits, 21% of the White population said they had been turned down after applying, while almost twice that percentage of the Black respondents (38%) reported that they had been denied.

From the results of NETWORK's survey data, it is clear that SNAP benefits provide support, but for many families who experience deep or chronic poverty, public benefits have not provided an adequate safety net during the recession. According to the Food Research and Action Center, one in three people eligible for SNAP does not receive benefits.

Rising Needs

Although few respondents (5%) reported use of soup kitchens, 41% utilized food pantries, and within this group, 63% did so more than once a month. Over half (57%) of the respondents said that their first visit to a food pantry or soup kitchen had been in the past year.

Twenty-six agencies that participated in the TANF Watch Project completed facility questionnaires, and 81% reported an increase in clientele. As a result, two-thirds of these organizations increased their staff and volunteer capacity in the past two years.

Chapter 4

Access to Job Training and Education

Because of TANF's work-first emphasis, only 30% of families meeting a state's TANF work requirement can seek educational opportunities, limited to a maximum of 12 months. This is despite the fact that, according to the Center for Law and Social Policy, 41.5% of all adult TANF recipients have less than a high school diploma.

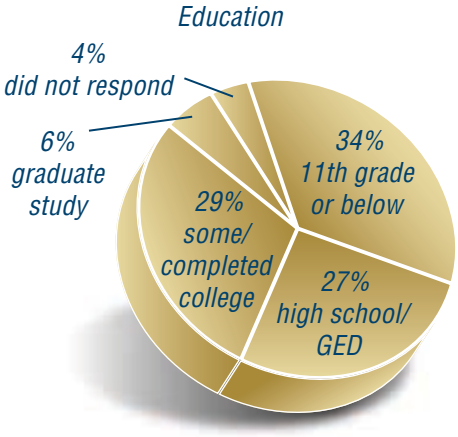
Among our survey respondents, one-third had not finished high school and 27% had completed high school or attained their GED. This contrasts with NETWORK's 2001 survey, in which twice as many (54%) had completed high school.

LISA F. YOUNG

Forty percent of respondents reported that a lack of education or job training was a barrier to employment. Among this group, 55% had less than a high school diploma. Respondents with less education also experienced a wider variety of other barriers to employment such as transportation and child care challenges, limited skills training, low English proficiency, etc.

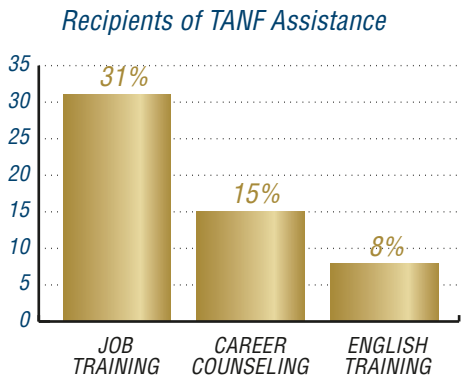
Half (50%) of the respondents lacking a high school diploma reported three or more barriers to employment, versus only 29% of those who had more than a 12th grade education. Twenty-six percent of those with less than 12 years of schooling had never held a fulltime job, versus only 8% of those with education beyond 12th grade. These findings are similar to those in NETWORK's 2001 report, according to which people who had received education beyond high school had jobs with higher incomes. Then, as now, education was critical to improve earnings.

Although TANF emphasizes work and work supports, only 31% of TANF recipients in our survey had received job training. Agencies that completed NETWORK's facility questionnaire reported this problem as well.



"We have had success stories to be sure. But generally, the program is not intended to get people out of poverty. If it is, then it should be heavy on education, because that is the only way people in the bottom rung can hope to get out of poverty. It's designed to just get them out of welfare. They do get out of welfare only to move into the category of the working poor." —*Department Director at employment case management agency in San Diego, CA*

"Some clients are getting jobs raising them out of poverty, but the overwhelming majority could greatly benefit from additional education. I wish that there was an easier process for someone who desired to go to school, especially regarding childcare. For example, in order to get childcare assistance, one needs to work an average of 5 hours per week in addition to full-time school, being a parent and running a household. For most of our families, they are single parents trying to juggle all of this. Not to mention most part-time jobs need you for more than 5 hours each week, so that would be more time committed away from the household and family." —*Case manager at financial and food assistance agency in Green Bay, WI*



"I am a student and I'm at [a halfway house]. I'm trying to do what's right and good to get my life together. I want my kids to grow up right and I need to get my G.E.D. to be able to do that. So I'm doing what I got to do. It's hard to do it because I'm trying not to go back to prison and to be the best person I can be. I'm trying to get a job, which is hard with my record… It's hard to get my G.E.D. because I'm not a good reader, so to do good on everything else I got to know how to read really good. I know Math and Science and History, but if I can't read the question they ask me, I'm not going to succeed on the test." —*19-year-old mother of two in Paterson, NJ*

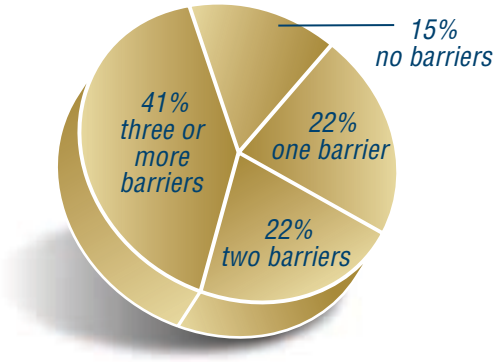
Chapter 5

Barriers to Employment and to Getting Help

Since TANF first became law, lowering caseloads while increasing employment rates has remained TANF's primary goal—and its measurement of success. Tragically, far too little attention has been paid to the large number of real-life barriers to meeting this goal.

Nutrition and low-income housing programs are critically important, but they can only go so far. In order to serve the common good, our nation must identify and address all barriers that undermine the life and dignity of people in poverty.

Number of Barriers to Employment



Identifying Barriers

Many people struggling in poverty face multiple barriers that keep them from finding jobs and getting the help they need. The number and severity of their challenges means that low-income families find it very difficult to find jobs and it is also challenging for TANF recipients to meet the expectations of their work requirements.

Multiple Barriers to Employment for All	
49%	not enough jobs "for people like me"
41%	transportation
40%	lack of education or job training
38%	child care
18%	can't speak or read English well
18%	emotional problems
17%	disability
13%	criminal record
9%	domestic abuse
5%	substance abuse

Among our respondents reporting three or more barriers, 68% cited transportation and lack of education/job training, while 61% mentioned child care.

According to a 2002 GAO study, 44% of all TANF recipients had some level of disability, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services today reports that people with disabilities constitute a growing proportion of TANF recipients. Unemployment rates for people with individual or multiple disabilities are higher than those for the rest of the population while government funding of training programs and employment services such as job coaching continues to be cut because of state and local budget deficits. This creates major obstacles for TANF recipients with disabilities who want to work.

Various recent studies have resulted in different estimates of the prevalence and severity of individual disabilities among TANF recipients. Mental health and physical disabilities are fairly common, as are various forms of learning disabilities. One of the great challenges is that an individual may have several disabling conditions, none of which is severe enough to gain him or her access to SSI (Supplemental Security Income) or other support systems. The sum total of the problems, however, makes it extremely difficult for the person to find employment.

> "I had never been on welfare before in my life. I have been on it for six months now. This was also my first time homeless. When I think about trying to go back to work, the two biggest concerns that are most on my mind are child care and transportation." —*Client at food pantry in Sacramento, CA*

In our study, 17% of the respondents stated that physical disability was a barrier to their employment, with 12% of men and 18% of women reporting emotional problems. Too little attention is paid to the impact of depression and stress on families, especially since children whose parents have emotional disabilities often exhibit problems at school and elsewhere. The children's problems, in turn, intensify the stress at home, creating a cycle that can last years.

ROSEMARIE GEARHART

Physical challenges also present employment obstacles. In our study, only 6% of those with physical disability barriers to employment reported that they were working fulltime.

Problems Faced by Men

Too little attention has been paid to the challenges faced by men, especially non-custodial fathers and low-income men with poor education. Men have been harder hit by unemployment during the recent recession than women, and many also face multiple employment barriers. The TANF Watch survey found that 62% of male respondents felt there were not enough jobs for people such as themselves, versus 47% of women. Thirty-three percent of men in our study had been laid off or fired in the past year, whereas only 25% of women had lost their jobs in that period. Twenty-six percent of men and 18% of women reported language barriers, while 25% of men and 16% of women had physical disabilities. Similar percentages of men and women in our study reported criminal records, but we know that men across the nation have far higher incarceration rates than women.

While 87% of the men in our sample reported that they lived with their children (vs. 92% of the women), non-custodial fathers continue to face serious problems in the U.S. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that over 24 million children live in households without their biological fathers, which translates to one in three children in America. Non-custodial fathers have far more difficulty accessing support systems such as job training and cash benefits.

Obstacles for Latinos

Respondents who completed the survey in Spanish faced many barriers to getting the help they need. For example, only 56% of Spanish speakers received SNAP benefits, as opposed to 78% of English speakers. This continues the trend we noted in our 2001 study.

Forty-eight percent lacked a high school diploma, versus only 31% of English speakers. Spanish speakers also had greater language barriers in seeking employment (53% vs. 10% of English speakers).

It is also important to note that the Spanish-speaking sample was less likely to report barriers due to criminal records or substance abuse. Although 15% of English speakers stated that a criminal record presented an obstacle to employment, less than 1% of Spanish speakers did so, and less than 1% reported barriers to employment due to substance abuse, as opposed to 6% of the English speakers.

> "An African American mother of four and her family have been homeless from at least 2006 and have been receiving TANF benefits for about the past four to five years. This is a mom who has serious literacy issues and recent psychological testing has shown intellectual functioning to be in the extremely low range. Some of her children have special needs as well. The work program system has been slow to work with and help this individual to follow through on possible employment opportunities… Both social services and the work program have been made aware of this client's intellectual deficits, yet there has been no movement (in the last 9 months) to place her in a more appropriate training program."
> *—Staff at a transitional housing center in Baltimore, MD*

Barriers to Getting Help

Since 1996, welfare caseloads have dropped dramatically with only a small rise during the recent recession. The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities noted that prior to 1996, AFDC covered up to 80% of eligible families, a figure that dropped to 40% for TANF in 2005. Nationally, it is estimated that 87% of the caseload reduction between 1995 and 2005 was due to eligible families not receiving TANF funds.

Among our survey respondents who did not receive TANF benefits at the time of the survey, many cited a variety of reasons:

- Poor outreach—had not heard of TANF or chose not to apply
- Employment requirements—chose not to apply if they could not comply with employment requirements; others were sanctioned off due to noncompliance
- Time limits—reached the 60-month limit to receive benefits
- Income disregard—19% of those not receiving TANF reported ineligibility for benefits due to increased income
- Hurdles in the application process and requirements to disclose personal information
- Belief that they do not qualify despite the fact they lived in poverty.

EDUARDO JOSE BERNARDINO

BARBARA SAUDER

NETWORK's Recommendations for Improved Services

The TANF Watch Project has painted a picture of what life is like for families struggling in poverty during this economic downturn. We interviewed people unable to buy enough food or find jobs, members of families that struggle just to make ends meet. These families need our help.

We know that TANF, working with other government-sponsored programs, should act as both a safety net and an opportunity to lift families out of poverty. This is especially true because unstable finances can foster family insecurity, and the resultant stress can affect adults' ability to get jobs. Vulnerable populations need better outreach, assessment, appropriate services, and access to transitional employment that leads to better jobs. Current programs fall short in meeting these goals due to insufficient funding and fragmented systems.

The following recommendations come from our project findings, our long experience with TANF and other assistance programs, and our understanding of current policies.

1. Change the measure of success.

Echoing the message from our 1999 and 2001 reports, we believe that a decline in caseload does not mean a decline in poverty or an increase in child wellbeing. The federal government's current measurement of a state's performance, "the work participation rate," does not indicate the state's level of poverty. Forty-five percent of our respondents have never received TANF assistance, but are still seeking help at the social service agencies, soup kitchens, shelters and medical centers that we surveyed. Clearly, TANF rolls do not reflect the amount of poverty in a given state. And with the given variation in state TANF programs, states should be accountable for more than just the size of their TANF rolls. The measure of TANF's success should be a demonstrated reduction in poverty, and states should be encouraged to lift more children and families out of poverty.

2. Emphasize the coordination of services and interagency collaboration.

With more than 40% of our respondents reporting they faced three or more barriers to entry into the workforce, it is clear that many cannot simply be given any job and sent on their way. Clients with little education or poor communication skills often must contact and fill out paperwork for the Department of Human Services, the Department of Transportation, the SNAP office, the Medicaid office, the Section 8 office—and more. Nonprofit social service agencies can barely keep up with changing, complex requirements so it is difficult even for them to help clients navigate the systems. Programs and services should be evaluated from the point of view of the client/applicant to make sure that staff members are fully informed and the

application process clear (e.g., through a unified application process for all programs). When agencies collaborate and systems can be navigated, clients are better served and more likely to sustainably enter the workforce.

3. Invest in all human needs programs so that they truly serve as a safety net during an economic downturn and provide an effective pathway out of poverty.

Recognizing that many programs have been stretched beyond their capacity to meet people's needs, particularly during the recent recession, NETWORK recommends that investment from a variety of sources be increased to address this heightened need and offer more opportunities to move out of poverty.

4. Build on the success of the TANF Emergency Fund and continue to invest in subsidized jobs.

According to a director of transitional housing and support services in Baltimore, "Our residents have experienced extreme difficulty in accessing gainful employment since the recession started, which affects everything from their ability to obtain housing to access to healthcare." With five jobseekers for every one job opening, subsidized jobs programs have been hugely successful throughout the country. Spurred by incentives in the TANF Emergency Fund created by ARRA, 33 states are poised to place about 200,000 adults and youth in subsidized jobs by September 30, 2010, when the fund is set to expire, according to CBPP. These programs have benefitted thousands of newly employed clients, their communities, and small businesses able to hire them with little risk. During periods of high unemployment, providing counter-cyclical jobs is an important way to address joblessness. NETWORK recommends encouraging states to participate in subsidized jobs programs and to build on their success.

5. Address the needs of non-custodial parents.

Non-custodial parents are virtually ignored by the safety net, but their income and stability have an enormous impact on their children's wellbeing.

> "Future legislation needs a definitive paradigm shift: Welfare-to-Work clients should not be viewed only as a cheap labor pool—which continues to push wages down and perpetuate poverty—but rather as potential participants in a workforce that is strong, robust and able to compete in this globalized, twenty-first century economy… People who are at a more disadvantaged place in society (for whatever reason) are the ones that should be given more opportunities and real, meaningful assistance." —*Department Director at an employment case management agency in San Diego, CA*

Many non-custodial fathers need training, education and support services so that they can give their children emotional and financial support that will have long-lasting effects. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, men account for 80% of the loss in employment this recession. According to our survey, the number-one barrier to entry into the workforce for men was that there weren't enough jobs available for people with their skills. These fathers need proper supports so they can be trained to hold stable, sustainable jobs in a new economy. NETWORK recommends investing in this population and in programs promoting responsible fatherhood.

6. Provide more help for people who are hard-to-employ and families facing multiple barriers to entry into the workforce.

Our survey respondents face many barriers to entry into the workforce. A physical disability, emotional problems, criminal record, domestic violence experience, or having a child with health problems can all be significant obstacles. NETWORK recommends sufficient funding from various sources to address these barriers. Because good case management and initial assessment are vital, training, hiring and support for case managers should be improved.

Our Spanish-speaking respondents faced some of the most significant barriers. With higher food insecurity and unemployment and lower education overall, the Latino respondents need improved access to government programs. As we noted in our 2001 report, NETWORK believes that the disproportionately negative effects of welfare reform on Latinos should be addressed through increased access to education, job training and support services. NETWORK also recommends that attention be paid to the problem of lawfully present immigrants lacking full access to benefits.

7. Expand access to education and training.

Employment is a vital tool in lifting families out of poverty, but a "Work First" attitude for the TANF program ignores how essential education and training are to economic success. With 40% of our respondents indicating lack of education or job training as barriers to employment, it is clear that a significant number of our respondents are not properly educated or prepared for the needs of the current labor market. NETWORK recommends realistic education goals to create effective pathways out of poverty.

8. Provide more flexibility regarding the five-year time limit on assistance.

NETWORK has consistently opposed the five-year time limit and supported greater flexibility at the state level. Many of our respondents were not on TANF due to a time-limit issue, either because they had reached the 60-month limit or because they were avoiding "using up" their remaining assistance. The time limit also deters some people struggling in poverty from seeking TANF help for fear that they may need it even more in the future. For those facing multiple barriers to entry into the workforce or trying to complete their education, 60 months is normally not enough time. In 1997, about 640,000 cases (20%) were allowed to be exempt from the limit. With today's lower number of caseloads, maintaining a similar number of exemptions would translate to a 35% exemption rate. Many states do not even allow recipients the full 60-months of assistance. NETWORK recommends greater flexibility in time limits, especially when unemployment is above 5%.

Resource List

Below are names and contact information for organizations that have been useful to NETWORK for their advocacy work and available resources regarding TANF legislation that have helped to structure the TANF Watch Project. This list is not intended to be exhaustive.

General Information about TANF

Brookings Institution
Center on Children and Families
www.brookings.edu
Publications and research on TANF

Catholic Charities USA
www.catholiccharitiesusa.org

Assistance Programs and Advocacy

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
www.cbpp.org
Reports such as "Policy Basics: An Introduction to TANF"

Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)
www.clasp.org
Reports such as "TANF's Role in Expanding Economic Opportunity" and policy analysis

Coalition on Human Needs
www.chn.org
Alliance of organizations to promote public policy

Legal Momentum
www.legalmomentum.org
Publications and Advocacy for "The Bitter Fruit of Welfare Reform"

Mathematica Policy Research Inc.
www.mathematica-mpr.com/
Reports including, "Assisting TANF Recipients Living with Disabilities to Obtain and Maintain Employment"

MDRC
www.mdrc.org
Publications and research on TANF and welfare policy

Urban Institute
www.urban.org
Academic Research on TANF and Fact sheets, "A Decade of Welfare Reform: Facts and Figures"

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children & Families
www.acf.hhs.gov
Research, statistics and reports on TANF

U.S. Government Accountability Office
www.gao.gov
Reports, "Fewer Eligible Families Have Received Cash Assistance Since the 1990s, and the Recession's Impact on Caseloads Varies by State"

Families/Children

Annie E. Casey Foundation
www.aecf.org/
Publications on issues regarding disadvantaged children

Grassroots

Lifetime
www.geds-to-phds.org
Grassroots advocacy and organizing for more education in TANF

Women for Economic Justice
www.cvhaction.org
Coalition of low-income led grassroots organizations in support of a more meaningful TANF program

Hunger/Poverty Statistics

Food Research and Action Center
www.frac.org
Issue briefs on food security

U.S. Census Bureau
www.census.gov
Statistics and reports under website link "poverty"

United States Department of Agriculture
Economic Research Service
www.ers.usda.gov
Research, "Household Food Security in the United States, 2008"

Latino Issues

National Council of La Raza
www.nclr.org
Issue briefs and publications on Latino civil rights

Washington, D.C. Advocacy

DC Fiscal Policy Institute
www.dcfpi.org/
Advocacy and research on TANF and other social service programs in Washington, D.C.

So Others Might Eat, Inc.
www.some.org
Reports, "Voices for Change: Perspectives on Strengthening Welfare-to-Work from DC TANF Recipients" with D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute

STEVE DEBENPORT

About Us

For decades, NETWORK Education Program and NETWORK, A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby, have stood in solidarity with people at the economic margins. Through education, organizing and lobbying, we work for a nation that values the worth and dignity of each person, that calls us beyond selfishness to community, and that ensures that all have what is required to lead a dignified life.

We cannot do this alone. We are grateful for the thousands of NETWORK members and supporters who make our work possible. Without you, we would have to close our doors, and a vital link between official Washington and people in need would be lost.

Thanks to your support, we were recently able to work with a nonprofit website expert to completely redesign our website. We could no longer afford to limp along with old technology when so much of today's advocacy is internet-based. We are proud of our new, more cost-effective and attractive site and invite you to visit us now and often at **www.networklobby.org**—where you will find frequent updates on what is happening in Washington and how you can make your voice heard.

And while you are there, please take a few moments to click on the red button marked "Donate Now" in the upper right corner. Your investment will make you an integral part of our work for a compassionate and fair nation.

Thank you!

NETWORK
A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby

25 E Street NW, Suite 200
Washington, DC, 20001
PHONE 202-347-9797 FAX 202-347-9864
www.networklobby.org

NON-PROFIT
ORGANIZATION
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT NO. 6962
WASHINGTON, DC

CHRISTIAN J. STEWART

"This report accurately paints a picture of the reality of far too many people who live in the throes of poverty in this country. As we approach the debate about the reauthorization of TANF, this report gives us not only a foundational context of the experience of poverty, it gives credible strategies for social change." *—Rev. Larry Snyder, President of Catholic Charities USA*

About TANF Tested: Lives of Families in Poverty during the Recession

Thank you to all who helped gather information for this report, including Professor Douglas Porpora, participating emergency social service agencies, Linda Howell-Perrin, and Bridget Flood and other representatives of the Incarnate Word Foundation.

We are also grateful to NETWORK staff members and outside readers who reviewed the report prior to publication and to Eugenia Kim for her report design.

Most of all, we wish to thank the survey respondents, whose descriptions of their real-life experiences bring authentic voices to the ongoing debate about how our nation addresses poverty.

"Thanks to NETWORK for shining a light on the alarming surge in very poor families with children going without food while TANF does too little to protect them from the recession. Policy-makers and advocates should read it!" *—Deborah Weinstein, Executive Director of Coalition on Human Needs*

"When considering policy changes, all too often we leave out the voices of people of people in need. This report makes sure that those voices and the voices of people who serve them on the front lines are heard." *—LaDonna Pavetti, Ph.D., Director of the Welfare Reform and Income Support Division at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*