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On 20th Anniversary NASW disappointed TANF not meeting goal to “end welfare as we know it”
Association calls on social justice advocates, state and federal governments to enact reforms

WASHINGTON -- The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) is disappointed the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, which marked its 20th anniversary this week, is not meeting its original goal to “end welfare as we know it” and needs reforms so it can better serve families who are low income.

President Clinton signed TANF into law in 1996 as a replacement for the much maligned Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program.

TANF was the signature program in a welfare reform initiative aimed at transitioning heads of households from receiving AFDC cash benefits to gainful employment. TANF recipients would remain in the program for a limited number of years and then families would no longer receive assistance.

From the onset there was concern TANF would not deliver on its objective to move more recipients to employment. There was also worry that punitive actions taken against recipients who failed to find work would create a hole in the financial safety net for families who were low income.

There is an emerging national consensus that TANF today is not a model to reduce poverty. The program’s role as a safety net is also far less significant than when it was first enacted and the program serves a small percentage of families who are low income.

NASW has a strong and unwavering commitment to economic justice and the maintenance of the financial safety-net for low income families with school-aged children. NASW’s recommendations to strengthen TANF so it better services families include:

- Increasing support for working families. In all but a few states the amount of the TANF benefit is less than half of the official poverty line.
- Expanding the definition of work under TANF to include higher education, English as a second language courses, literacy, vocational training and elementary and secondary education.
- Addressing barriers that keep people participating in TANF from being employed, including physical and mental illness, disabilities, substance abuse, and domestic and sexual violence.
- Including financial incentives for states that significantly reduce child poverty and lift sanctions that deny aid to children whose parents engage in activities deemed inappropriate.
- Restoring federal funding for assistance to documented immigrant populations.

Despite NASW's disappointment, it is not helpful to highlight TANF's failures. It is more important to work with others on seeking solutions to the challenges to achieving true welfare reform.

With that in mind, NASW sees the 20th anniversary of TANF as an opportunity for NASW and other advocates for economic justice to join federal and state governments to implement TANF reforms.

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The [National Association of Social Workers](#) (NASW), in Washington, DC, is the largest membership organization of professional social workers with 130,000 members. It promotes, develops, and protects the practice of social work and social workers. NASW also seeks to enhance the well-being of individuals, families, and communities through its advocacy.