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Long-Term TANF Participants and Barriers to Employment: A Qualitative Study in Maine

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Although welfare rolls have declined dramatically since the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996, many of those parents still receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) face multiple barriers to employment. In response to a proposed state bill increasing work requirements and imposing stricter time limits, the authors conducted focus groups and interviews in order to learn about the experiences of long-term recipients of TANF in Maine. Domestic violence, children's disabilities, and health issues for the mother emerged as key obstacles to meeting TANF work requirements for the 28 women participating in the study. Study findings contributed to the defeat of the state bill and informed policy recommendations offered herein.

Key words: TANF, workfare, disability, domestic violence, barriers to employment

Introduction

Several bills introduced in Maine's legislature in fall 2006 let advocates know there was a re-emergence of a "get tough on welfare recipients" mood among some legislators. Ten years earlier, in the wake of welfare reform, an active coalition of advocates for low-income families had made a case to the legislature to refrain from adopting some of the harshest aspects of the federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). They had been successful in their efforts. For example, through the Parents as Scholars program, Maine has continued to consider the pursuit of higher education as an allowable work activity for individuals eligible for welfare, while many other states severely restricted access to post-secondary education for recipients of TANF after PRWORA. Additionally, Maine families receiving TANF have not had to face the five-year time limit on receipt of benefits imposed by PRWORA and implemented by many states in the past decade. Rather, families in Maine who have faced barriers to economic independence have been able to access TANF support beyond 60 months, if they are complying with the rules of the program.

Although both the House and Senate of the Maine State Legislature had Democratic majorities in the 123rd Legislature (2007-2008), eight-year term limits imposed in 1996 have resulted in considerable turnover in both chambers. Newly elected legislators—even some Democrats—eager to respond to the anti-welfare sentiments expressed by some of their constituents, were perhaps more likely to introduce harsh measures than might have been true if more legislators, who had participated in the more thoughtful debate 10 years earlier, had still been in office. LD 957, *An Act to Enact a Five-Point Welfare Reform Plan*, was one such bill, introduced by a Republican legislator elected in 2004 (Documents for LD 957, 2007). The bill had ten co-sponsors, including one Democrat and two Independents. Among other things, LD 957 would have placed a 60-month lifetime maximum on TANF benefits and increased the work requirements to 40 hours per week.

Such policy responses result from a conservative framework built on stereotypes regarding people in poverty. This

behavior-based framework assumes women on welfare have poor work ethics and lack personal responsibility, and thus must be forced to work in exchange for benefits (Lens, 2006). This conservative framework led to the “work-first” approach, enshrined in PRWORA and reinvigorated in the Deficit Reduction Act (DRA) of 2005. This approach not only stigmatizes low-income mothers as work averse and behaviorally disorganized, but also as undeserving of benefits, time to parent their children, education, and general respect (Kahn, Butler, Deprez, & Polakow, 2004). Instead, a framework that takes into account the behavior of labor markets and the barriers to employment faced by many low-income families would bring forth a different policy response.

In order to address the stereotypes driving the proposed Maine bill, the staff of Maine Equal Justice Partners (MEJP), an advocacy organization for low-income individuals and families in Maine, initiated an effort to collect evidence from current recipients of TANF who faced multiple barriers to employment. As in previous campaigns to educate Maine legislators regarding the reality of people living in poverty in the state (see Butler & Seguinto, 2000; Butler & Deprez, 2002), MEJP again solicited the help of a social sciences researcher to assist in the collection, analysis and presentation of data. Beginning with a brief review of the national evidence regarding barriers to work for many TANF participants, this article presents a case study of the experiences of 28 Maine women (collected through three focus groups and six telephone interviews) whose life circumstances have made economic independence from TANF particularly difficult. The barriers faced by these women include the impact of domestic violence in their lives, the time it takes to care for children with disabilities, and their own health problems.

Barriers to Employment

It has been well documented that parents receiving welfare often face significant barriers to employment. Dealing with current and past domestic violence, caring for children with disabilities, and having health problems are three such obstacles frequently experienced by long-term recipients of TANF.

Moreover, many parents receiving welfare face more than one of these barriers to employment, among other obstacles such as lack of transportation, low levels of formal educational achievement, and few job opportunities. We discuss some of these barriers—domestic violence, child disabilities, health and mental health problems—below, drawing attention to some of the consequences that emerge when the barriers are prevalent in a woman's life.

Multiple studies have found that the rate of domestic violence is higher in the population of families receiving welfare than in the general population. The majority of women receiving welfare (50 to 60 percent) have experienced domestic violence at some point in their lives; recent or current rates of abuse for women on welfare tend to range from 20 to 30 percent (Tolman & Raphael, 2000). It has been well documented that although these rates of abuse among TANF participants are very high, women are unlikely to disclose domestic violence to their TANF caseworkers for multiple reasons, including fear that their children will be taken from them or that caseworkers will misuse the information (Pearson, Griswold, & Thoennes, 2001). Victims of domestic violence are at increased risk for physical and mental health problems, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, depression and generalized anxiety disorder (Tolman & Raphael, 2000). Not only do these health issues affect a woman's ability to work, but abusers often sabotage their victims' efforts to secure employment. Examples of such interference include causing facial injuries before job interviews, threatening to kidnap children from child care, and in-person harassment at the place of employment (Tolman & Raphael, 2000).

In addition to women's own health issues, the rate of disability among children in families receiving welfare is very high. Providing care to children with disabilities can create an obstacle to employment, as such children frequently have numerous health care appointments, and it is often difficult to find appropriate child care. Data from the National Survey of America's Families indicate that families remaining on welfare are more likely to have children with disabilities than those who have left the program (20 percent versus 14 percent; National Council on Disability, 2003).¹ A national study by the

Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) found that 25 percent of those TANF participants who were not employed had a child with an illness or disability, limiting their ability to be employed (Polit, London, & Martinez, 2001). Moreover, it is not uncommon for long-term recipients of TANF to live in families where both a parent and a child have a disability. This was found to be true in eight percent of the families in a 2002 study by the General Accounting Office (GAO, 2002).

One consistent finding among the many studies measuring prevalence of barriers to employment for TANF recipients is that parents needing welfare assistance have higher rates than the general population of health and mental health problems that interfere with their ability to work. Goldberg (2002) reviewed several national studies (by the General Accounting Office, the Urban Institute, and MDRC) which all found very high rates of physical and mental health impairment among TANF recipients (from 33 to 44 percent); frequently, these individuals face several health problems simultaneously (Polit et al., 2001). This rate of impairment is about three times the rate for adults not receiving TANF benefits (GAO, 2001; National Council on Disability, 2003; Zedlewski & Alderson, 2001).

Numerous studies have documented that parents receiving welfare often face more than one barrier to employment. Pamela Loprest and Sheila Zedlewski (1999) suggest that the strongest predictor of not participating in a work activity for parents receiving welfare is the presence of multiple barriers. Their study examined the experiences of current (i.e., receiving welfare in 1997) and former welfare recipients (i.e., those receiving welfare in 1995, but not in 1997, after PRWORA, or welfare reform, had been implemented). Loprest and Zedlewski found the percentage of "current" recipients with multiple barriers to be significantly higher than for former recipients who had been receiving welfare prior to PRWORA, but who had left the system by 1997. Furthermore, they noted that 17 percent of recipients in 1997 faced three or more barriers to employment while only seven percent of recipients faced that many barriers in 1995. Moreover, among former welfare recipients, 42 percent had no barriers to employment, while among those continuing to receive welfare in 1997, only 23 percent faced no barriers to

employment (Loprest & Zedlewski, 1999). The overall message of this study is that while welfare rolls dropped dramatically after the passage of welfare reform in 1996, those who continue to receive TANF are more likely to face multiple barriers to engaging in work activities.

In their study of long-term (three years or more) recipients of TANF in Utah, Barusch and co-authors found them to have considerably higher levels of mental health and health problems than other TANF recipients or the general public; not only did they have severe and persistent barriers to employment, they also tended to have multiple barriers to self-sufficiency (Barusch, Taylor & Abu-Bader, 1999). Similarly, a Michigan study of one urban county found almost two-thirds of the women receiving welfare in 1997 had two or more of the 14 barriers to employment, and 40 percent had at least three (Goldberg, 2002). Two national studies found high rates of multiple barriers to employment: a 1999 study by the Urban Institute reported 44 percent of TANF recipients had two or more barriers (Zedlewski, 1999) and the 2001 MDRC study found 85 percent of non-working TANF recipients had two barriers and 44 percent had at least four (Goldberg, 2002; Polit et al., 2001).

What We Learned in Maine

In order to learn about the experiences of long-term TANF recipients who confronted obstacles to becoming employed in Maine, a notice was circulated through the networks of MEJP inviting individuals who faced barriers to employment to participate in regional focus groups. Enough people responded to this invitation to hold focus groups in three cities situated in the central part of the state (Bangor [n=7], Lewiston [n=5], and Augusta [n=10]). So that we could also learn about the experiences of families in other regions of the state, telephone interviews were conducted with six women living in northern and southern towns.

The women ranged from 17 to 44 years of age and had, on average, been receiving TANF for over five years. It is important to note that more than 70% of TANF recipients in Maine receive assistance for one year or less (Maine DHHS, 2008); this

sample of women are thus unusual in that they face particular obstacles to leaving the program. Two women were Native American, one Puerto Rican, and the remaining women were European-American (reflecting the racial makeup of the state, which is 98% white [U.S. Census, 2004]). Over three quarters of the women in the sample (77%) had experienced domestic violence; nearly two-thirds (64%) had children with disabilities; over half of the women (57%) had significant health problems. Just under half of the sample (45%) did not have access to transportation.

Focus group discussions (lasting about one hour each) and telephone interviews (lasting about 20 minutes each) were guided by a list of questions regarding participants' reasons for first applying for TANF, their experiences with ASPIRE (Maine's welfare-to-work program) and meeting work requirements, barriers they perceived to leaving TANF and becoming economically self-sufficient, their hopes for the future (i.e., what they would like for themselves and their families in five years), and their perceptions regarding how the public views TANF and the people receiving it. The focus group discussions and telephone interviews were recorded and transcribed word-for-word. The narrative data were analyzed for recurring themes using the open coding process of grounded theory analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Among the themes that emerged from the data, three significant barriers to employment were evident: coping with domestic violence and its aftermath, caring for children with disabilities, and suffering from significant health issues. Furthermore, many of the study participants faced more than one of these three barriers, as well as other obstacles, such as lack of transportation, scarcity of jobs, and difficulty finding adequate childcare. These three primary barriers to employment will be described below through quotes from the women in the study.

Domestic Violence

Leaving an abusive partner was the catalyst to TANF receipt for many of the women in this study. They spoke of putting up with the abuse for years, as they feared being economically destitute and unable to raise their children on their

own. They understood why women returned to violent homes when welfare benefits were insufficient and rules and regulations of the TANF program made their lives so difficult; some had returned to abusive partners themselves in the past and continued to consider that option in the present when their circumstances felt particularly bleak. When asked why they first began to receive TANF, many women in the study relayed stories of domestic violence. One study participant described the circumstances that led to her first receiving assistance:

The father of my baby was very abusive; he was an alcoholic... I was 17 years old and unfortunately, you know, had very low self-esteem and issues like that. And he'd leave for work, and I remember one time it was three or four days before I even saw or heard from him again. Yeah, it wasn't good. So finally when my baby was two months old, he had come home and destroyed the whole house, and I ended up just leaving because he had me, like by the throat. He smashed everything in the house, and I just left. The only thing I took was a little bit of our clothes. And then I stayed in a room off from my brother's house; and then he was abusive. So I finally got another apartment, and that's when I applied for the Section 8 and TANF and all that stuff.

Making the decision to leave an abusive relationship often takes many years. As one woman stated, "It takes a while to realize there is a domestic violence situation, you know. I just got to it myself; it took a year of counseling." But once free of abuse, their lives remain very challenging, as was described by many of the women in the study. For example, another woman spoke of her frustrations in meeting TANF requirements since leaving an abusive partner:

How can you get a job if you don't have a vehicle? You're supposed to walk [your child] to childcare, drop him off, hitchhike to work, work eight hours, come back get your kid. If you're 15 minutes late it's going to cost you more...It's not worth it, so you either go back to your abuser, or you go and live with somebody that you

don't know, or whatever, or get a nice big cardboard box to set up underneath a bridge, you know.

Women in the study stated that such harsh requirements and the difficulties of poverty made them wonder whether they would be better off with their abusers. One mother of six children stated, "Now I could go back with the abusive boyfriend or the abusive ex-husband and I wouldn't be alone and I'd have a little help...A lot of people choose to go back, and I've almost made that choice several times because it's so hard." Another woman was considering returning to her violent home, given the stress of raising her child alone and meeting TANF work requirements. She stated:

I just got out of the domestic violence shelter not too long ago so I don't really know a lot of people around here. My daughter's not comfortable with strangers. I'm not going to leave her with someone I don't know, not with all the horror stories that go around about kids getting hurt. So I can't meet their requirements for me to work because I have nowhere for my daughter to go... After all the domestic violence that we've been through, we've moved five places since she's been born. She doesn't want to be with anybody else; she wants to be with her mom right now... This is why people don't make the right choices and don't leave their abusive partner or leave their situation or whatever, because they feel better off. I'd rather get smacked once a week and live in a good home than to go through what I'm going through now.

Another woman reported marrying young and having her life turned upside down by an abusive husband. She and her husband left Maine for a west-coast state where he began to abuse her two months into the marriage. "And then it was like three times a year I could count on he would lose control," she stated. She reflected that she had not been taught to recognize domestic violence as a young girl and that, over the years, people of authority, such as her minister, had advised her to stay with the man in order to preserve her marriage. Finally she was free of this relationship that had put her behind on

her life goals and she needed TANF to get back on her feet. She asked for understanding as she made these changes in her life:

Let me break down the stereotypes for you, let me show you that I'm someone who's probably going to be, in five years, in med school, in graduate school, doing something along those lines. I had everything set up to come out of high school, go to college, and to be the highest level of our society and everything fell apart because I made the choice to get into a bad relationship. And now I need help to get back out of it or we're going to be throwing my life away and potentially my daughter's life away.

Not surprisingly, years of abuse have left women—and often their children—emotionally and physically scarred. These health issues often present obstacles to full-time employment.

Children with Disabilities

Many of the participants in this study were caring for children with special needs. Their lives involved appointments with multiple specialists; frustrations in finding suitable child care; and a keen awareness of their need to be available for their children, who often had unpredictable and frequently disruptive behavior. One mother described her difficulty in leaving her child in day care:

I can't leave my daughter there when she can physically tear up the room, and they have other kids there, and she needs me to be there. I can't go somewhere and worry that I'm going to be gone and they're going to call me five minutes later to say you need to come back and get her.

Another woman of six-year-old twins with disabilities stated that she had found a good school for them, but she could only leave them there for half of a day. "They are not capable of doing a full day of school. And even though they're six years old, mentally their nervous systems are like that of a four-year-old." This woman would have a very difficult time working a

40-hour work week.

A mother living in a central Maine city had found appropriate day care, but was unable to find employment to match the hours when her special childcare was available:

He goes to the Children's Center for the Autistic program; he's only there 9:00 to 3:00. I tried to get banker's hours; I tried to get into bank telling because that's like a 9:00 to 3:30 type of job. That's about all you're going to find; otherwise they want you to be there 8:00 to 5:00. I can't do that; I have to volunteer.

This woman reported that because she could not find employment that corresponded to her child's day care, she volunteered at a domestic violence project instead. Staff members at her volunteer site were very understanding when she was unable to come in due to the needs of her three children; it is unlikely that an employer would be as flexible and sympathetic to her absences.

A woman living in northern Maine described the impact of her children's disabilities on her employability:

No one would babysit them because they had a lot of behavior problems. I got fired from that job. I got fired from nearly every single job I've ever had because of the kids, my oldest ones that are disabled. But I didn't know they were disabled back then. Everybody just looked down on me because I was a welfare mom. You know what I mean? Well, come to find out they both have ADHD; they both have social anxiety. Could you imagine the difficulty in schools with those two?

Even mothers with older children had concerns. A woman who had recently left TANF due to the income she received from part-time work was looking to increase her hours so that she would be able to support her three children. She worried about finding after-school care for her son who had a mental health diagnosis. "My son is 13, but he has bipolar disorder, and I think he really needs someone to be responsible for him, especially as I increase my hours and I'm here less." Another woman spoke of her four teenage children with behavior

problems, which she attributed to their years with an abusive father. She had learned that they needed ongoing supervision, thus restricting her availability for employment. "My difficulty is not being able to leave my children home alone—my four teenagers—because I wouldn't have a home to go to. They can be as bad as little ones, you know."

These women view the care of their children as paramount. It will not necessarily save the government any money by making it more complicated to provide this care; increased requirements for work activity and stricter time limits could well harm their children. Working 40 hours per week would not allow these mothers the time they need to take their children to medical appointments. Moreover, finding child care facilities willing to take their children—much less facilities that could provide the attention their children needed—was next to impossible for some of the mothers in this study. The focused attention they are able to provide their children when they do not have employment responsibilities that interfere with needed care will likely benefit society more in the long term than the potential damage to their children that could occur through inadequate care as they work at what are often low-wage jobs. If the 60-month time limit were strictly imposed on these families, the loss of TANF benefits—as meager as they are—would likely increase homelessness, food insecurity, and other financial hardship for these families.

Health of Parent

The barriers to employment posed by health issues are illustrated by a woman who spoke of the multiple appointments she needed to keep as she attended to both her son's and her own medical issues:

If I could go full-time, I would go full-time. I have a son that's SSI [disabled and receiving Supplemental Security Income]; we have assessments that need to be met. We're both doing counseling, psychiatrists....I would rather work 40 hours a week....It's not possible! I wear my psychiatrist out when I tell her what I've got to do in a day!

Another study participant reported that she first began to receive assistance due to a car accident over ten years ago. She recalled:

I was in a car accident and I broke my neck many years ago. Back then Medicaid didn't cover physical therapy for me. I was pretty much, for a few years, just building up my own body strength and physically recuperating or whatever. There was no home health nurses that would help you back then. But that's what led to me getting on TANF.

Although she did not speak of ongoing disability, her recuperation from this accident was a many-year process, during which time she needed financial assistance for her family.

The emotional consequences from the trauma experienced by women in abusive relationships often interfere with their ability to meet work requirements. As one woman stated, "I keep on having panic attacks. I hear horror stories, so I don't want to leave my daughter anywhere; I don't want my baby to go anywhere." Another woman who had left a seven-year abusive relationship while pregnant spoke of the harsh treatment she received from TANF workers when what she needed was compassion. She learned during her pregnancy that her baby was disabled and was ultimately stillborn; this was emotionally devastating to her. She described the lack of sensitivity with which her TANF worker applied work requirements when the worker told her that she would have to begin looking for employment again just days after the loss of her child. Not surprisingly, this woman continued to deal with the impact of her abusive relationship, the loss of her baby, and the pressures imposed by TANF requirements. She stated, "I made a doctor's appointment a few days ago 'cause I don't think my medication is working for me 'cause I've still been getting depression symptoms and it seems like I keep reliving the birth and everything."

As found in the national studies reviewed earlier, the women in the study usually faced not just one barrier but rather multiple barriers to employment, as illustrated in many of the quotes above. For example, domestic violence often left both

mothers and children with psychological trauma. The difficulties of meeting work requirements while caring for disabled children were often compounded by the dearth of child care facilities equipped to care for children with special needs—another example of multiple barriers. Removing themselves and their children from violent homes and relationships often left mothers with the additional obstacles to employment of no car and no home, a third example of multiple barriers; in a rural state such as Maine, it is very difficult to meet work requirements and transport your children to childcare without a vehicle.

What Do These Stories Tell Us?

In Maine, the average length of time that families receive welfare is less than two years. Only a small fraction of the caseload receives TANF for extended periods of time; for example, less than one tenth of one percent of those families who received TANF in 1997 still did ten years later (MEJP, 2007). In fact, the average length of stay on TANF is 23 months, and only 4% of the 2007 caseload has received TANF for more than 5 years. Moreover, among those families receiving TANF for more than five years, 74% include an adult with disabilities.² Since 1994, the number of families in Maine receiving welfare has decreased nearly by half, but those families who continue to need assistance face substantial obstacles to financial independence.

Changing Maine's TANF program by adopting absolute time limits or increasing work hours will not assist any of these women in securing economic self-sufficiency. On the contrary, such changes would only make their lives more difficult and would certainly affect the level of care they could provide for their children. None of the women participating in this research enjoyed being on TANF, although they were grateful for the assistance as they worked toward their goals of financial independence. Both federal and state TANF policies appear to be based on the myth that recipients of welfare do not want to work and will choose to stay on welfare a long time if not forced off. The stigma of TANF is pervasive and can be very harsh. One woman described its impact on her child:

“My daughter’s had to deal with one of the kids that we live near. They’re not on TANF and she is. And they found out, and they won’t let their son play with her anymore.” Another woman reflected on how the TANF program is perceived:

There’s no doubt in my mind that nobody can survive on this and that it is value-driven not evidence-based or -driven. You know, it’s not helping people get out of poverty. Most people make all kinds of assumptions of what TANF provides. Most people don’t realize that it doesn’t touch housing; that you are only given enough money to do, to basically do nothing. I think that they think people who are on TANF use it fraudulently. I think that they think they’re the undeserving, and substance abusers and that basically it’s their own fault... I think people think people are doing it because they don’t want to work; and that’s not true. And I think that’s one of the biggest problems is that people, one, really don’t understand what welfare is; and, two, who the people are that are on it...I mean that’s the biggest problem is that we’re not concerned about poverty; we’re concerned about blaming poor people for it.

The women in the study were eager to be free of the TANF program as soon as possible. But they also understood the realities of their lives: the impact of domestic violence in their lives; their children’s special needs; their health; and the scarcity of jobs, public transportation, and appropriate childcare. The woman quoted above expected to be very employable on completing her schooling in one more year. Nonetheless, she was aware that she had a difficult journey ahead with many potential obstacles to financial independence:

Yes, I can, I can do it. But certainly, you know, what if I got really, really depressed again, or, you know, what if in my daughter’s next surgery, something went terribly wrong or what if I’m not able to get my medications? It’s such thin ice in surviving when you have nothing, and building it up, you know. Plus all the loans and everything I have, you know.

In Maine, like elsewhere in the country, there has been a dramatic decrease in welfare caseloads. In 1994, the number of individuals receiving AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) averaged over 22,000; this dropped to 18,000 in 1997, immediately after PRWORA, and averaged 13,604 in 2007³. This dramatic decrease in numbers may be explained by several factors, including increased work requirements after the 1996 welfare reform, as well as periodic improvements in the labor market. Some percentage of the caseload reduction is likely the result of people choosing to avoid the stigma and hassle involved in receiving TANF, including work requirements that fail to acknowledge and accommodate disabilities of parents or children or the realities of getting free from a family violence situation. Maine has also increased its transitional benefits over the past decade to families leaving TANF for employment (e.g., child care, transportation, Medicaid); these benefits have no doubt contributed to the decreased caseloads over the past decades. The women who participated in this 2007 study face additional barriers to employment. While they too may benefit from transitional benefits and eventually move off TANF through employment, they may need additional assistance, given the particular challenges they face.

Recommendations

Maine currently provides women who have experienced domestic violence a "good cause" exemption from work requirements if:

the individual is unable to participate because of physical injuries or the psychological effects of abuse; because of legal proceedings, counseling or other activities related to abuse; because the abuser actively interferes with the individual's participation; because the location puts the individual at risk; or for other good cause related to domestic abuse. (Title 22, Section 3785, 1997)

This good cause exemption provides at least equivalent, if not more, protection to TANF participants than the Family Violence Option (FVO) of PRWORA, which many states have

adopted (Legal Momentum, 2004). The FVO allows states to implement “a special program to serve victims of domestic violence and to waive program requirements for such individuals” (Code of Federal Regulations, 1999). All but three states (Idaho, Oklahoma, and Virginia), have adopted the FVO or equivalent policies, though the implementation of the FVO has varied across states (GAO, 2005).

Similar to the findings of the national review of the FVO (GAO, 2005), the experiences reported by the women in this study indicate that not all case workers are fully implementing the good cause exemption in Maine. Assuring that this exemption in Maine, and the FVO of PRWORA nationally, are fully enforced is of utmost importance to the many women who seek TANF after leaving abusive relationships. As illustrated through the quotes of women in this study, meeting work requirements in the aftermath of such trauma is often not possible; service providers and TANF workers need to be well-informed regarding the allowable exemptions to work requirements so that these policies are consistently offered to eligible women.

A promising initiative at the federal level provides a model for modifying work requirements for individuals with disabilities or who care for children with disabilities without jeopardizing federal work participation requirements. The Pathways to Independence Act of 2007 was introduced in the 110th Congress by Republican Senator Gordon Smith from Oregon, with both Maine’s Republican Senators Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins as co-sponsors; this builds on bipartisan legislation introduced in the 109th Congress. This bill would allow states to “Develop modified employability plans for TANF recipients who have been determined by a qualified professional to have a disability or to be caring for someone with a disability” (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2007, p. 1).

The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 and its associated regulations have made it more difficult for states to meet the work participation rates of the TANF program. Nonetheless, PRWORA specifically states that Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the American Disabilities Act of 1990 apply to the TANF program (CBPP & CLASP, 2007). States are thus obligated to accommodate recipients of TANF who have

disabilities and help them succeed in work programs. Examples of “best practices” include states which have designed programs specifically to provide extra help to people facing barriers to employment such as adult or child disability (e.g., Tennessee and Iowa); Vermont has partnered with the vocational rehabilitation agency to provide services to people with disabilities who receive TANF (CBPP & CLASP, 2007). Some recipients of TANF have disabilities severe enough to make them eligible for Supplemental Security Income (SSI); providing recipients of TANF, who have disabilities, with assistance in their SSI application process can benefit both the individual (e.g., higher benefits and no work requirements since recipients are recognized as disabled) and the state (SSI is federally financed) (CBPP & CLASP, 2007).

Given the work-first approach to welfare that has consistently received strong support among policy makers at the national level and most state legislatures, it is perhaps not surprising that LD 957, An Act to Enact a Five-Point Welfare Reform Plan, was introduced into Maine’s legislature in 2007. Nonetheless, as evidenced by the data presented here, increasing work requirements and setting stricter time limits for receipt of TANF, as stipulated in this bill, would have caused undue hardship for hundreds of Maine families who—against considerable odds—are doing their very best to raise their children to be healthy, contributing members of our society. These include many parents facing multiple barriers to employment, including working to be free of domestic violence, caring for children with disabilities, and dealing with their own physical and psychological health problems. The stories of the women in this study contributed to an educational campaign that ultimately prevented the passage of LD 957. While the legislative advocacy was successful, it was a defensive move to ward off further difficulties for families receiving TANF. Proactive steps to improve the lives of families on TANF facing barriers to employment include better enforcement of good cause exemptions and the FVO for families who have experienced domestic abuse, passage of the federal Pathways to Independence Act for families dealing with disabilities, and the development of programs providing special assistance to recipients of TANF with disabilities in meeting work requirements or applying for SSI.

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(Endnotes)

- 1) This is because having children with disabilities often creates barriers to employment, thereby making it more difficult for families to leave TANF.
- 2) This information was provided to the Maine legislature by the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) in 2007.
- 3) This information was obtained from Maine DHHS in 2007.

