



April 2002



YOU SEE WHAT I'M SAYING?

Current and Former TANF Recipients Talk About Being on Welfare

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In the Fall of 2001 an ad-hoc group of the Chicago Jobs Council's (CJC) Welfare-to-Work group conducted four focus groups with current and former Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients and an additional group with their community-based employment services providers to inform and strengthen CJC's TANF reauthorization advocacy.

Special thanks are due the 31 women who participated in these focus groups and permitted CJC to bring their voices to TANF reauthorization advocacy through CJC publications. Participating organizations and their clients included:

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Chicago Commons Employment and Training Center

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INTRODUCTION

By September 30, 2002 the United States Congress must “reauthorize” the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). Passed in 1996, this legislation “changed welfare as we know it.” Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) was replaced by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). This new welfare program required parents to participate in defined work activities in order to receive aid, and limited an adult’s lifetime TANF eligibility to five years. All states were awarded a TANF block grant, required to earmark a specified percentage of their own revenue as Maintenance of Effort (MOE) funds, and granted significant flexibility to design and implement welfare-to-work programs and services.

Much state and national research on welfare reform and its impacts has been conducted. We know that the vast majority of TANF households are headed by women. Many leaving the TANF rolls since 1996 found entry-level employment, although most earn less-than-poverty wages. Others have been sanctioned or terminated from the rolls for supposed or flagrant noncompliance and encounter significant hardship.

Researchers have necessarily reduced the countless experiences of thousands of current and former TANF recipients into vital numbers, striking percentages, telling bar graphs, and instructive pie charts. TANF reauthorization advocates and foes have used this

information to promote their positions in congressional hearings or visits, welfare reform conferences and symposiums, as well as Department of Health and Human Services sponsored “Listening Sessions” held across the country. As Congress prepares to pick up the reauthorization debate, these decision-makers on welfare policy may be far removed from those in their districts and states most directly impacted by the TANF system. People contending with poverty must not be lost through carefully crafted messaging, winnable strategizing, and political posturing.

In this publication, the Chicago Jobs Council (CJC) gives voice to the people behind the numbers. The following pages hold the experiences and ideas of 31 women, current and former TANF recipients and their providers of employment services, who participated in five focus groups CJC conducted in the Fall of 2001. Their thoughts reflect their perspectives as short or long-term welfare recipients, and as women of various ages, backgrounds, races, ethnicities, and languages. Their remarks, largely unedited, are collected here so that you will give them serious consideration in your own welfare advocacy or policy-making.

See what they are saying. This is welfare as *they* know it.

“YOU SEE WHAT I’M SAYING?”



CWIT



JOHN BROOKS



JOHN BROOKS



JOHN BROOKS

Current and Former TANF Recipients Talk About Being on Welfare

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I'M TRYING



CWIT

“I had a hard time getting on TANF because of the simple fact that I didn’t want to get in it, but I have a child with disabilities. And it made it very hard for me because before I had my son I was working, I was going to school, I was doing everything. Until he turned like one and a half, so I had to try to get incentive, they denied me so many times. So we went to a psychiatrist and a whole bunch of places to get letters saying [my son] could only go to school for two and a half hours, you know. Not good, but he’s been kicked out of daycare. And he’s a threat to others and himself. And it’s hard for me to, you know, get a job. TANF gives me something; I don’t complain because of TANF I have enough for my own apartment and my rent. I’ve been kicked out of shelter homes and I’ve been kicked out of a lot of places because of my son. Out of the public aid office, Social Security office, so it’s hard. I don’t complain what TANF gives me because it helps me too, but I just hope that they don’t take it away because I need it.”

Rika, TANF recipient, mother of two children including a son with a behavioral disability

“I have one daughter. I’ve had TANF, just the medical part for my daughter. . . . And I’m trying to finish up school; I get my associates in one more semester. So, I’m trying to get by. [IDHS] denied me on cash or Food Stamps so I’m mooching off of my parents, which [my parents] don’t like very much. . . . I work for 25 hours a week. . . . Well, last week I had 14 [hours] . . . Next week I have 10, you know how am I supposed to survive off of that? It’s impossible and then they want me to work and go to school but yet they don’t want to give me any type of assistance. . . . And insurance at my job cost more for a part-timer than for a full-timer and it costs like 50 something dollars per week. My check would never — I would never have anything if I get insurance. I don’t know why they don’t put me on the medical part of [TANF].

. . . I’m going to school, like I said I’ve got six months to get my associates and I can barely, you can barely find a job with college credits. . . . It’s an Associate’s degree in criminal justice. . . . It’s hard to find a job right now. They’re cutting everybody’s hours.”

Ruthie, 20-year-old Medicaid recipient with one child, working and going to school, reflecting on these economic times

“I worked as a receptionist about one year and three, four months. . . . I am lucky. I got all what I want. I finish studying English. No, I don’t finish studying. I study all my life. It’s hard. But right now, my job is very good for me because I have to speak English all day. Sometimes it’s hard, sometimes not. Conversation all day but it’s very important for a life here. And I study my computer school. I tried looking for a job as a programmer, but right now with the situation change and the market is down. Probably next year I try again. Plus I was historian and archivist in Russia, and I try to try a job like archivist probably.”

Tanya, former TANF recipient reflecting on her job experience and skills

“I did get the GED because on these applications, the first thing they’re asking you is do you got a high school or GED diploma.”

Ms. Mac, TANF recipient of several years

“I did like a lot of volunteering work at my children’s school. I did volunteer work at a church in my neighborhood, and I did maybe one other thing I done. I can’t remember what it was. But I was steady doing like volunteer work on and off. And then I started here [at Asian Human Services]. . . . I got sent out for a couple of jobs. I looked for a couple of jobs on my own. I didn’t have no good luck. I started getting disgusted again. So then they sent me to what they call ‘subsidized’. . . . [After a first placement of four months] they subsidized me to a Ace Hardware on the north side of Chicago. . . . that was back in — I think I started there doing subsidizing in March. I got the job June the 12th, and I’m still working there.”

Ernie, TANF recipient reflecting on her work first experience

“But the thing is we are going to job fairs here, you know and then they say that we don’t want to work. All we want to do is lay around and receive the check. That’s not true. We’ll go on job fairs. No one calls us. We do applications everywhere. I put resumes all over the world. No one has called me yet.”

Ann James, TANF recipient of several years with three adolescent sons

“And I’ve been in [Women in Transition] here for a few months. . . . They’ve got me working at, putting hours in at the — where do I go? The [alderman’s] office over here . . . and it’s okay, you know I’m getting some skills from over there, so I’ll have something else I’ll be able to do. So it’s pretty much okay. I’m trying to make it. That’s all I can say, is I’m trying to make it.”

D. Anderson, TANF recipient and Work First participant

“From the Women In Transition program I went to a hospitality class. From the hospitality class I started work at the Palmer House and I’ve been there ever since. It’ll be a year on the 11th of this month.”

Vina, mother of four and a licensed cook who lost her previous job due to an arm injury, and returned to the TANF rolls

“Currently I’m attending school so I can find a job. . . . I have never worked because every time I apply for a job, they said that I needed more English.”

Cristy, a mother of two and TANF recipient of two-and-a-half years

“Well I don’t feel like [IDHS] owe[s] me because these are my children; I had them. So, I know what’s got to be done. I know what I want. So, it’s up to me to do what I have to do and that’s what I’m doing. Doing what I have to do and I went to school and made that accomplishment and now I went to a work site. I picked the work site that could benefit me and once I get in that, get that job and I’ll be financially established; I’ll have medical benefits, dental benefits. All the benefits that I need and I’ll be able to provide for my child all at once. And that’s why I picked the work site that I knew would become beneficial to me later on.

. . . They hired two other ladies to do the same job that I was already doing. I trained for it, I had trained, been there six months and they didn’t hire me. They hired somebody else who had used to work there some years ago that they said they had to bring them in first. I took it. I mean I was upset because they hired them people but I kept on going in and I was transferred over to another department that’s more training.”

Dar, TANF recipient and Work First participant who has been working for her TANF check in a hospital placement for over a year waiting to be hired permanently

“But the thing is I have my son’s disability, so I went to three jobs, . . . I think it was in a month I went to three jobs in a month, believe it or not and at the end I still didn’t have a job and public aid didn’t want to give me nothing.

. . . I went to public aid and I took a letter from St. Patrick [church] and I told them, look I want to work. It’s not like I don’t want to work and it’s not like I don’t want to go to school. . . . It’s just that I can’t. I can’t. My son’s been kicked out of one or two daycares. I have letters that say that he has a disability. I put him on the school bus. I have to be on that school bus. There’s times when they call me twice a week and say I have to sit there with him in school, you know. . . . And every time I had a job — I had a lot of jobs — but I’ll be there for a week or three days. Why? ‘Your son’s doing this, come get your child.’ It’s not like I haven’t tried.”

Rika, TANF recipient with 4-year-old son with a behavioral disability, a younger daughter, and currently pregnant; Rika has experienced domestic violence

“[IDHS] don’t tell you, ‘Okay, you did make these accomplishments and we see that you’re trying to do something.’ They tell you to do more. And you can’t do any more than you’re doing if you’re doing something.”

Dar, TANF recipient and Work First participant

“We placed this woman — I give her a lot of credit because she remained on the job for 120 days successful[ly]. . . . She has a lot of emotional problems. . . . You know what DHS told me? ‘Your job is to get her out of that job and place her to a better pay work’. . . . That woman took me six months to get her to work dealing with childcare and domestic violence — you name it.”

Lil, provider of employment services

MINIMUM WAGES OR TANF?

NEITHER ONE GOES VERY FAR.



JOHN BROOKS

“My rent was like almost \$500 and I was only working at McDonald’s and my [TANF] check was 278. So my check and my work check, that was just the rent right there. But after I started working for like that money, they started seeing my stub; they cut me off talking about I made too much money. . . . Yeah, and so I was steady going in asking them why did you cut me and rent is the whole of my check and my public aid check? You know what I’m saying? What’s this they make, they’re talking about. ‘Well you make too much money. I’ve asked you to move to another apartment that you can afford.’ My Food Stamps were steady getting cut every month. So, I had to leave, you know what I’m saying, my apartment.

. . . But once I get out [of the shelter], and if I do find a job, you know, rent is — how am I going to afford rent and my kids? I don’t care where you work; you could work at McDonald’s. They are going to cut you off and that’s your check. [It’s] not enough to support you and your kids and your rent and your two kids every month — and food, the cost of food.”

Kisha, TANF recipient, young mother of one child and pregnant

“The beginning was very, very difficult. It was Food Stamps, okay, but every rent to us very high and [IDHS] give to us \$414 and we should every month borrowed the money from cousin.”

Muba, Bosnian refugee and former TANF recipient

“You know they give you abundance of Food Stamps which is great, you know, but the cash, you need the cash, you know.

. . . And nobody’s getting no new clothes any time soon in my house. I mean I’m definitely not. If they’re getting something new it’s like a school uniform. No one wears Nikes in my house. They wear Payless shoes, \$15.99. And then I get those \$2 cards. You get \$2 off when school starts. And, you know, my kids — Salvation Thrift Stores. . . . I haven’t bought clothes for myself in years.”

Cory, TANF recipient reflecting on the limits of her TANF income

“Food Stamps for me and for my daughter was enough. It’s enough for two persons. But cash, we got cash for our living costs, is not enough for rent because the rent was Chicago and it’s too high. And I have to borrow money from my relatives.

... Because I understand, people give me job. Who can’t speak, who don’t understand culture, traditional, everything; maybe pay more. ...”

Tanya, former TANF recipient reflecting on the difficulty refugees have managing with a TANF income in a new country

“... Because my son, my 4-year-old was born after the time that they were cutting off. You couldn’t get money for him so he’s not on it. And then I have another son also which is on Social Security, which is why he is not on it. So my 17-year-old daughter, she is the only one on it. And it’s kind of hard when like I live up in the Rogers park area. I have Section 8. I live in Rogers Park area, and the apartment I’m in is \$1,100 a month. So it’s like when you try to get a job dealing with Section 8, the more money you make, the higher your rent goes. So it’s like steady pulling you down, you know. If you don’t have a job, then you’re going to try to pay your rent out of that \$200 and something and then live off the rest, which isn’t that — you know. And plus the social security, you know, that goes for bills and all that, just to pay my bills and stuff. So that’s kind of like where I am. ... It’s like when you get one thing, then the next thing is cut off. When you get a job, public aid is cut off. ... Every dollar that [my kids] make or I make it either increases my rent or cuts down on the public aid. So either way it goes, you still are in a deadlock.

... I remember one time my check was \$250 and my rent was \$250. And just like I say, the toothpaste, toilet paper, the soap and all these extras, where was that coming from?

... We in need of a roof over our head, you see what I’m saying? That’s the main thing that you looking as the money. It’s not that I need money to go buy me clothes. I need money to go pay off my car loans. I need money as a form of housing.”

Ms. Mac, TANF recipient, reflecting on the limits of her \$278 in TANF cash assistance, social security income, and low-wage work for her household of five

“I called [IDHS] to see if they could provide or approve of some types of medication for my husband. Their response was that I needed to pay in cash. And I asked family members to help me pay for the medication which my husband needs monthly.”

Cristy, TANF recipient

“I get \$125 worth of Food Stamps and I get \$75 worth of cash. And I guess that’s to make up the difference whatever a family of three is supposed to get. But since the last month, I have been cut down to three days. So right now, it’s not enough money.

You know, you going to work . . . then [IDHS] be like you don’t get no money cause you all done made too much. How can you make too much and you ain’t making enough?”

Ernie, TANF recipient with two children, reflecting on her recent employment and income.

“We really do need those Food Stamps. Even if we do get a job, you know I don’t understand why they take the Food Stamps away from us. They’re talking we made, you know, too much money. That’s buying [my kids] food. Some bills aren’t going to get paid. . . that cash doesn’t stretch a lot, see what I’m saying?”

. . . See, you’ve got to take one month at a time. Say for instance, if we get this check this month, so maybe two things will get done. You know, but you can’t take all of it and try to do a whole list of things. You’ve got to take a month at a time, step by step.”

Ann James, TANF recipient, reflecting on what it’s like living on her income

“I only receive \$200 in cash. And they stated that’s enough to support myself and my daughter. I have to pay \$330 in rent. With that amount I can’t even pay to take a bath, do laundry, or use toilet paper. You can’t buy that stuff with Food Stamps. . . . I have been going through all kinds of difficulties. I have been in a situation of not being able to pay the rent on time because as I stated before, \$200 in cash is not enough. And the landlord has called my attention to this. He has to pay his mortgage on time.”

Beni, a TANF recipient with a 30-year work history and a previous employer of 23 years

“My assistance right now, when I get this month, I get my check a month, it pays my rent, my light and my gas. I have other bills to pay — phone, insurance, all of them bills. I can’t pay them but I get by. I make a way to do what I have to do. But it’s — I’m not comfortable so it’s not financially established.”

Dar, TANF recipient and mother of three adolescents

“I had two children that were supposed to be graduating, one from 12th grade and one from 8th grade. And I had to make a decision, you know what was I going to do, how I was going to do it. You know, because I knew my son had went all the way through twelfth grade and he deserved everything, you know because he worked hard. But along with that my son graduated from the eighth grade. He was just making his next step you know. So it was like a hard decision but my oldest son, he got a job at UPS and that’s the only way that we really, really made it through because my arm was broke and I really couldn’t work. And unemployment was giving me the runaround. . . . And then the \$414 that I was getting, that did help when my rent was \$625. So it was a strain to get through those two graduations.”

Vina, mother of four adolescents, returned to the TANF rolls due to an injury

“Sometimes I borrow money because what I receive is not enough to pay my rent. I can’t buy Pampers for my son.”

Dama, TANF recipient with one child and currently pregnant

“I receive \$300 and I have to pay \$400 in rent. I have worked before. . . . Sometimes I cannot buy things for my daughters. Sometimes when they are sick, I can’t pay for medication. If I don’t pay the rent, I lose my apartment. Some medications the medical card doesn’t cover. Sometimes I don’t have enough money for food. Right now, I have not received Food Stamps for a month. I don’t have any food at my house. I was feeding my baby only with water and sugar because I didn’t have milk at home.

. . . A lot of people have been affected that they have lost everything. They are starving without any benefits. It is affecting the families. Kids are without medications.”

Ralle, a TANF recipient of two-and-a-half years and mother of three young children

“Many of our clients live in subsidized or public housing and without that assistance, many clients would not be able to meet their monthly cost on the TANF allowance only. I have also spoken to many clients who, once employed, will have their Food Stamp allowance cut drastically, to the point in which it is of no help to them. For example, one client who became employed as a security guard — a \$6.00 an hour job — had her Food Stamps for herself and her 13-year-old son cut to \$10.00 per month.”

Provider of employment services

“If they live in subsidized or public housing, they can meet their housing and food costs, however, they have no money left over for cleaning detergents, clothing, or family activities. They are barely making ends meet. I have several clients who, after becoming employed, have returned to me stating that they were ‘better off on welfare’ because their Food Stamps were cut to the point in which they had no money for groceries. When special occasions come up, the parents must choose between those events and their rent or food, transportation costs.”

Provider of employment services

“What you get from either TANF or even your working — most of those clients are under poverty level. . . . Take into consideration housing in Chicago — they might have to live with family members; they cannot be successful. There is no [way] with that cash they receive enough money to pay rent. There is no rent in Chicago for less than \$300.

. . . We have a family, she has three kids. She cannot send all three [to school] at the same time because they have to switch their uniforms. One goes in the morning, the other two in the afternoon — she don’t have the money to buy. That’s not money they can get out of the check, because then they don’t pay the rent and they would be out.”

Lil, provider of employment services

MAKE SOME SENSE



JOHN BROOKS

“So I was going to [re] apply at the new office, they were saying, ‘No, you need to work. No, you’re too old to go to school, it’s too late to go to school; you need to be working. How are you going to support your family if you aren’t working?’ Just because you’re going to give me my 278 until my time is over with, until I get my GED because if I don’t have my GED, I’m not going to get a good job that’s going to pay me anything. . . . So how do you expect me to work? You put me somewhere that I don’t want to be and I’m going to get fired because it’s not where I want to be. But if I just go ahead and you put me in a GED program or a teen parent program, so I can get the high school diploma or the GED.”

Kisha, young TANF recipient, reflecting on messages she received from caseworkers when she was 18

“Even if you tell them, ‘Okay it’s going to take me three weeks to get a first check or four weeks to get my first check.’ They say okay but when you’re thinking you’ve got some money on your LINK card, there’s no money because they knew you started working. . . . They don’t wait until you get stable and see if you’re going to stay at the job for a month or two. . . .”

Temille, new TANF recipient living in transitional housing

“And about child support. Public aid keeps the money. I don’t receive the amount of money they take away from my kid’s father. Public aid keeps it.”

Ralle, TANF recipient with three daughters, 5, 3, and 6-months old

“. . . So I applied for child support and out of child support, my baby’s father works a good job. I don’t know why I get 25 bucks a month. It’s a kid and I have no idea. He makes at least a week \$500, what’s the point you know? I don’t know what’s going on.”

Rika, TANF recipient with two children

“. . . More staff for the public aid office. Because I mean one person got probably, who knows, probably 100 people, you know what I mean? That don’t mean the focus is on, you know, what the person knows.”

Glo, mother of three young children, receiving Food Stamps only

“Once your child was 13 years old you didn’t get those 60 months. You couldn’t go to school . . . and consider those as some of the hours that you worked, no. You had to do their hours and put them hours in to get their check, no ifs, ands, butts about it. . . .”

D. Anderson, welfare recipient of several years with a 17-year-old daughter and limited work experience

“At the beginning, I didn’t understand why if I want go to school why they don’t teach for me because I was educated teacher in my country. And I want to be here position teacher. And I go to, I went to the public aid. . . and I tried to explain to [my case-worker]. . . and she give to me a few addresses where I can go and maybe apply for a job.

. . . Actually, we were eight hours of day at school, only study English. . . . And for us, it wasn’t good that [IDHS] stopped this study English. They send my husband to work. . . to be subsidized for TANF.”

Muba, reflecting on the job assistance given to her and to her husband after four months of ESL study

“What I don’t understand is when you do get a job, why do they send you letters every other week to go to an appointment. I’m supposed to go to an appointment every other day when I’m supposed to be at work.”

Kisha, TANF recipient

“And they come to you and tell you, well, whatever we give you have to go for. You can’t sit there and say, well, you know, I’m educated in this and that. It doesn’t matter. If Burger King is hiring and that’s who they want you to go to, that’s where you got to go, you know.

. . . Find me some training, for them to show me one time, I would have done it. Cause I pick up real easy. It don’t take me long to do nothing. But I never gotten that chance. . . . After three months, they could have trained you on something. . . . They could have put you somewhere for three months, trained you and gave you a job placement.”

Ernie, reflecting on her lack of training opportunities while a public aid recipient off and on for 15 years

“Some people can’t learn as fast as others and it might take them a little longer. . . . There might be a reason that they might have to stop for like a month or two of going because maybe their kid got sick or they got hurt or something. But give them a chance to, you know finish education.

. . . The best thing to do is to go to school and get you some kind of training. That’s when you start working, you make a good amount of money. Because that’s the only [way] you’re going to make it through.”

Dar, TANF recipient

“Just like I say, I was over at Ace Hardware. Like I said, I’m trying to get on typewriters and computers. They got me at the hardware store. They got me at the cleaning house place. They got me housekeeper at the hotel. You see what I’m saying. . . . I can’t really see myself — and while I get this job, I can’t see myself in this a long time. So after a while, you’re going to work this and then you’re going to be back [at the contractor].

. . . I would like them to work with us to say, ‘Well, okay, you put down like what you would like to get into. Let’s work with that. Let’s try to get you more experience in that.’ Just like say computers or telemarketing or something like that. ‘We want to train you into that. We’re going to put you into a program that’s going to give you computer classes, help you to bring up more than what you have. You say you have typing experience. We’re going to take you over here to this’. . . . Put them in a job that you know they’re going to stay at. Don’t put them in a job that I worked there three months. I’m sick of it . . . Put me at something that is going to hold my interest. . . . Something that I’m going to feel comfortable in. Something I’m going to look at and I’m going to say, ‘Man, it’s 2:00 already when I’m supposed to get off at 1:00.’ You know what I’m saying.”

Ms. Mac, TANF recipient of several years and Work First participant

“Okay, just like a lot of people that have been in all that public aid for a long time. Now their children are finally grown but they never did get an education. Why not allow them to get theirs now? And then, you know, get to go to a trade school”

Cat, recent TANF recipient with a college degree

“ . . . When I was pregnant with my daughter, I was nine months pregnant, my caseworker wanted me to go out there and work, and I had little problems with my daughter. I was so big, my feet swelled up and all that and my doctor put me on bed rest. So, after I had my baby, a month later, my caseworker wanted me to go out there and work — a month later after I had my baby. I was so — the baby’s small and all this. And I told that I wanted to go to school. Can I get my certificate to be a preschool teacher? She told me I couldn’t go to school so she put me up in this [Work First] program.”

Annette, TANF recipient with two small children

“ . . . I was making six dollars an hour. I started like January 3rd, something like that, and they cut me off in two weeks time, public aid had cut me off. . . . They didn’t even let me work the whole month to see was I going to even have the job until the next period. . . . I didn’t have the job for one month. . . . [IDHS] is talking about well why didn’t you find another job? I said because when I started that job I was only getting six dollars an hour when you all cut me off before two weeks time. So when the next job I get I figure I better get one that’s going to pay some money, okay?”

D. Anderson, TANF recipient and Work First participant

“They should . . . evaluate your individual needs. . . . Don’t just lump us under one umbrella and say well, well all you all going to go to this same class and then some of you all going to make it and some are not and who cares.”

Vina, former TANF recipient

“At least giving them at least one year to see how well they, you know, like hold onto their job knowing that, okay well they were in this program, that helped them get established there. So they’re holding onto their jobs, that’s a success story right there because they’re finally able to do what they needed to do.”

Cat, TANF recipient

“You’ve got to stay [at a work site] long enough to grow with the company and for the people to know you and see what you’re capable of doing.”

Dar, reflecting on the Work First program’s standard three-month work site placement

“[IDHS] cancelled my case before because my son was sick and I could not make it to school. They cut one half the amount for one month without any previous notice. For the last six months, they have been taking out \$27 from my cash for something I don’t understand. It is not clear to me why they are taking that money.”

Dama, TANF recipient

“Everybody needs a good paying job. But for me to obtain a good job, I need to get my GED. Everywhere I go, they asked me if I had a high school diploma. They tell me I need better English. . . . When I asked my caseworker if I could come to Chicago Commons for my GED or training, her response was no. I was told that I had to go to work, period, and that was that. . . . The supervisor stated that I could go to school.”

Ralle, TANF recipient

“[IDHS] sent me to school here at Chicago Commons where you can not miss any days, but at the same time they give you appointments during school hours. If I don’t go, they threaten to take away my check. And some times they have cut my benefits.”

Beni, TANF recipient

“My main objective about TANF is because why would they send me out to work when I have two mental[ly ill] people at the house that I take care of. And when they could set up some kind of program to where I could get benefits for taking care of them instead of putting me on a work site. Because I have to have somebody to watch them while I’m out here doing what they want me to do and I don’t feel like that is right.”

Brenda B., welfare recipient for nearly 20 years with four teenage sons and care giving responsibility for an aunt and cousin

“That’s just like Section 8. They want to take people off of Section 8 but they don’t put no pressure on you. They have their family self-sufficiency program. . . . They don’t just kick you off and say, ‘Now we took your Section 8 from you and you’ve got to pay your rent and see how you’re going to pay.’ At least they were giving you something to go with when they take you off.”

Dar, TANF recipient, reflecting her desire for extended cash assistance with employment

“The majority of RSPs (Responsibility and Services Plan) do not look individualized to the clients needs. I was wondering, do the caseworkers even ask the clients about their educational history, or their work experience, or desired careers? What kind of assessments do they perform with the client before deciding whether or not they are engaged or intensive?”

Provider of employment services

“When we get the RSPs it’s just, if he doesn’t speak English — ‘Learn English’. It’s not that easy. You can’t learn English just like that. ‘Needs childcare’ — when you send application to childcare it takes them at least a month to approve those payments. . . and they give me a client and — ‘Get them a job in two weeks.’

. . . I have a Somali woman. She cannot say a word in English. . . . I sent her to ESL class. Two months in a row she got perfect attendance. . . . Now, when you say, ‘How are you?’ she can say, ‘Fine’ or ‘Okay’. . . . But she’s not ready to go to work and [DHS] let her in this program. I think she was with me for six months. . . . I don’t know when they find that she was employable; that she was ready for work. . . . We don’t have anyone who speaks her language.

. . . I have a client. She has 10 more months [on her TANF clock]. She has eight children. The 16-year-old is pregnant, due next month. Her boyfriend committed suicide. The husband has [mental health] problems. And it’s really, really hard. How can we push her to go and get a job?”

Anka, provider of employment services

“I have a person come to my program. She have reading level 10.9. I want that woman to go to college. Because it’s guaranteed that woman will be successful and that woman will become self-sufficient.

. . . For us they say, ‘GED’. Well, the client come with the idea they want to get their GED. When I’m testing that person they [have] 3.0 level reading. And then [IDHS] give them six months to be in my program. There is no way.

. . . For TANF clients . . . the moment they walk in to the agency they should have a complete assessment . . . so there is enough time for a person to get skills.

. . . [Clients] should not be cut off [from benefits] completely until they have completed their 90 days. That’s a probation time in employment. . . . If we cut them immediately. . . it’s putting the entire family, not only the mother but the kids, at risk.

. . . There’s lack of childcare in the community. Because they are paying so low no one wants to baby sit. If you’re not licensed — paid \$10 for all day for a child.”

Lil, employment services provider

SOMETIMES YOU FEEL LIKE

YOU JUST CAN'T WIN.



JOHN BROOKS

“I put my mind to it and just because — you don’t know how bad it hurts me that I can’t leave my son with somebody. You know how hard that — I go apply for a job and then for somebody to tell me, like today he tell me, ‘Well, you know what, he can’t stay here no more’ after I already got the job. I’m thinking well I’m going to go to school and I’m — I tried going to school three, four times already. Okay and then I’ve been in school for a week, maybe two months. And then they tell me, ‘No, [your son] is doing this, [your son] has done this. . . .’ There’s the good times, you’re up, you’re thinking you’re going to make it. But then they come and you’re back down.

So it’s hard, it’s hard for me because I’m sick of going to court, I’m sick of going to public aid. Nobody wants to hear me. Nobody wants to do nothing for me.”

Rika, TANF recipient, domestic violence survivor, mother of two including a behaviorally disabled child

“I always had some type of part time job like telemarketing or something in sales, always. Okay? So, if you go up and you get a little more money, they’re going to cut what you get anyway. Okay? Even Food Stamps. I’ve been cut totally out several times.”

Cory, TANF recipient with two sons, whose government assistance, employment, and housing have been unstable due to domestic violence

“I was working at Jackson Hewitt and [IDHS] cut me off okay. I lost the job and they still left me without money and Food Stamps. . . I was working there for four months at Jackson Hewitt and you know Jackson Hewitt is seasonal as it is. I reapplied and you want to know where they sent me? To the compensation office [IDES]. I went to the compensation office and you know what happened in compensation; they said, “ ‘public aid.’ ”

Marla, young mother of two, reflecting on the instability of her income and resources

“[IDHS] be all on the women and we got kids to take care of; babies, and the men they can go out and — a man should be able to go out there and get him a job quicker than a woman could.”

Annette, TANF recipient

“I was on TANF for like two years and then I was cut off because my situation for living was kind of crazy. It was like domestic violence, you know, involved. . . . My information wouldn’t get in [the system] right. Plus my living situation, they changed it around. Your information couldn’t be transferred so they say, so that it’d take a while for that.”

Cory, TANF recipient

“They’re supposed to help you with vouchers and stuff and get your stuff. Now, okay, I had this form stated [I was going to take classes for] security work, right. Okay, they’re supposed to help me, I’m going to make a long story short. [My caseworker] told me — I [had] the paper from the place, from the job with the letterhead. He told me he didn’t believe it; it was phony — bottom line.”

D. Anderson, TANF recipient

“You know I say change that attitude; everybody work together. I think we could, you know, really make progress if everybody would work together. You know, help people, you know, don’t be all mean and evil with them. You know they don’t even want to let you go to school. They don’t want to let you do nothing.”

Ann James, TANF recipient and Work First participant

“Okay, just like in my case, I’m moving so I’m going to have to start looking for another apartment once I get a job. I’ve got to save that money to pay rent, security and everything. Okay, well if you’re going to take my Food Stamps, how am I supposed to pay [for] my son and save for an apartment at the same time? You know what I’m saying? So there’s still always something that’s going to slap you in the face when you try to do better.”

. . . Now with this [Work First] program, they can steady send you from workshop to workshop, I mean from site to site and then they don’t want to give you a job. I’ve been at two different ones with the understanding that I was supposed to get the job, okay. But they’re steady holding me back saying, ‘Well we haven’t made a decision, we haven’t made a decision.’ I cannot stay in one spot like that without trying to get back on my feet.”

Cat, new TANF recipient with 18 years of steady work experience, had to give up her apartment when she lost her job and since has been unable to secure employment.

“I don’t think its enough childcare support so you can continue your education. So, you can improve your life. So, you don’t have to depend on public aid. . . . They do not give you enough time to become independent.”

Dama, TANF recipient with no work experience

“Okay, when you went to the public aid office and you tried to ask your caseworker anything, they only want to know if you brought the information that they want you to bring so that they can keep your case updated. They tell you that you have to go get a job but they don’t tell you anything about how you’re supposed to get it. . . . [IDHS] don’t, I mean they don’t help you like they’re supposed to. They don’t give you any information about like, I tried to ask them about daycare. I’m sorry, but a lot of daycare in the city aren’t going to take a two month old baby so I can go get a job so I can support my daughter and myself and get off of them. They don’t help me with anything that they’re supposed to.”

Becca, TANF recipient with one child

“After six months or 28 days in treatment, she’s not completely — she still has to have support. . . . If she doesn’t comply in my program, she gets sanctioned. Then easily people can go back to substance abuse. . . .”

*Lil, provider of employment services
reflecting on the tenuous reality for some
Work First clients*

SAY IT LIKE IT IS



JOHN BROOKS

“Why all this drama? You know and I know that other people have abused public aid in the past years before but that ain’t got nothing to do with the people that got kids today.”

Marla, TANF recipient

“I need a job. You know I don’t think it matters, but you know I ain’t going to work at UPS. UPS — they have you working three hours and that was killing me the first time. And you know there ain’t no use in me riding out to no Willow Spring Road for three hours and come back and get paid like \$60 a week. And then by the time taxes are done with you, you’ve got \$30. . . . They’re always hiring, too. They’re always hiring and ain’t paying nothing. Then they tell you at orientation, ‘If you try to pay the bills or trying to pay bills and take care of kids, you don’t need to be here because it’s not enough to take care of kids and pay your bills. So you shouldn’t be right now trying to do that.’ They’ll tell you that on orientation.”

Marquita, TANF recipient and mother of an infant

“I’ll take a job training if they could place me on a job.”

Ernie, TANF recipient

“And then what I think [IDHS] need[s] to stop assuming everything about their clients, because what they assume, that’s what they think that’s what you’re going through. . . . When you go to your appointment [with IDHS] they’re the ones doing all the talking. You’re trying to tell them your situation and they’re telling you something else; what they want to hear. So what they need to do is they need to take time, take pride. You know what I’m saying they need to put their clients first instead of themselves first and listen and understand what the person is going through before they assume and [have you] jump through hoops.”

Kisha, TANF recipient

“I think that people that are homeless should go first.”

Temille, expressing her desire that homeless families have quick access to TANF benefits

“DHS wants me to go to work and they don’t think there is any need to go to school.”

Ralle, TANF recipient

“It’s hard to find out the information for the resources for help with heat and gas. . . A lot of people don’t have that information. . . And it’s like you have to go through a big change in your life. Like most of the people that get that information is people who are domestic violence or substance abuse. People who went through programs will find out that information.”

Cory, TANF recipient and domestic violence survivor

“ . . . I refuse to let my 13-year-old child live in the projects at his age now. There’s no way I would do that; not the way things are going. They’re tearing them down now anyway, so you cannot get in one.”

Cat, new TANF recipient, reflecting on the public housing option

“Now the women here in the [Women in Transition] program, at least they give us a chance to talk to them one-on-one and list our concerns or our complaints or, you know. They know us all by name. They could see us in the street. Our caseworkers don’t even know us like that because we don’t never, you know, when they see us because they want us to come in for some reason because the state said they’ve got to have this information. Other wise they don’t really care what we do.”

Dar, TANF recipient

“You might have to do hair, you might have to sell your body or anything you know. You got to do what you got to do. I had to do something illegal but a momma got to do what a momma got to do.”

D. Anderson reflecting on her situation following sanction

“[IDHS] stop[s] your benefits. They don’t even tell you that they’re going to stop your benefits. You know you [have] to pay your bills and buy your kids some food and you don’t have anything. And then you’re looking like what happened? And then you go and call [your caseworker] and she’s talking about, ‘Well I sent you a letter.’ And hasn’t sent out nothing; the letter will be laying on her desk.

. . . I believe that [IDHS caseworkers] know all of us can get out of the program, then their jobs are going to be next. Then they aren’t going to need any workers anymore. So if they can find some kind of reason to keep you down or kick you off at one point, come back to reapply; then they’ve got enough chance to stay on the job a little longer. That’s what I think they’re trying to do.”

Ann James, TANF recipient with three sons

“I do believe that the [case] worker has the resources, but because they don’t want to do more paper work. I am sure that the worker do have the resources, but it’s the paper work.

. . . My caseworker never talked to me about the RSP or discussed it with me.”

Cristy, TANF recipient whose first language is Spanish, commenting on her IDHS caseworker experience

“If you say your child failed a grade, they want to know why your child failed in that grade. ‘Okay, we’re going to get her evaluated or him evaluated to see if they have some kind of disability.’ Okay, then they want you to apply for SSI. ‘Where is their fathers at?’ They want you to find their fathers and apply for child support. Whatever income they figure they can get you in, to take them off, that’s what they’re going to do. And that’s what they’re doing now.”

Dar, TANF recipient and mother of three adolescents

“I’ve been around, you know, I had been a volunteer at the aid office and I got to see a little bit behind the walls, you know. And it is kind of tough because, I mean, they’ve got like a 100 and something cases, you know. And everybody’s calling. . . . ‘I didn’t get my check. I didn’t get my Food Stamps. . . .’ You know, they’re people too.”

D. Anderson, TANF recipient

“. . . I found this out; people who have had like drug treatment or suffer from substance abuse, I find the system to be more lenient in trying to help them than somebody who’s just like, well, just because I haven’t did that drug. . . . ‘Well, you haven’t did drugs so you know we know that we need to tend to them more.’ ”

Vina, former TANF recipient

“How can this program be successful when so many people don’t have food out there? There are a lot of people who need the assistance who have no food for their kids. Because so many cases have been cancelled. They have been cut off. There is no way this program can be successful. . . . The government called it successful, but the people who have lost benefits call it hunger.”

Beni, TANF recipient

“In my opinion for [TANF] to be successful, the person who you pushing to get off has to be financially established for them to be successful at what they did. [IDHS’] success story is they just got this recipient off of aid and I don’t know where she’s at. She might live in the shelter over there. She might live on the street. You know that’s their success story.”

Dar, TANF recipient

“[IDHS] only give[s] us the amount of time that we’re supposed to come out with a job and if we don’t, if we aren’t doing it to their satisfaction, they’ll snatch us out of this program and put us in another program which we’ve got to start all over again. And then they give us a time limit on that. You know that don’t make any sense. Give a person time to better themselves. You know, work with them. The caseworkers don’t work with you. They are against you.”

Ann James, TANF recipient and Work First participant

“In my experience, clients have often expressed dissatisfaction in regard to their relationship with their IDHS caseworker. Clients have stated to me that their caseworkers are disrespectful and appear to have little regard for their humanity. Clients also report that caseworkers ask intrusive questions and a lot of times will act as though the clients and their concerns are beneath them or unimportant.

... Clients do not know about the training grants available to them from public institutions. Often clients know that they can get the training but because of time limits, they are hesitant to enroll in classes that will last more than a few months.”

Provider of employment services

“Child support [is] not helpful to clients because they only receive \$50.00 of whatever the father sends in and therefore, it is not much help to them.”

Provider of employment services

HOW DID THEY GET HERE?



JOHN BROOKS

“Either you’re going to go or do it on your own because they aren’t trying to help us. They don’t try to tell you to do it. They just tell you you’ve got to find a job and that’s that. So in my condition, I just went over to the Dawson, looked up and see what they had and went, applied for it and then I told my caseworker, ‘Well I want to do my hours going to school.’ So, that’s how I ended up in the programs that I was in. Then found out that I could take up a trade if my score in reading and math score was high enough, I could take a trade too. So boom, two things to do, the trade and the GED. I was about finished with my GED when I started at my electronics class, so I finished that one. And shoot, they say they gonna help you get a job when you’re finished. . . Ain’t no placement in no job and they don’t send you nowhere to, to see if you could get one. I looked up [in] the different things and newspapers and went to different places. But it still seems to me like they looked at my age and they could see. Then you take somebody who waits 40 years to go get a job, they must be ready to work, they’re coming out here to find one. Give me the job. You going to see.”

Dar, TANF recipient, reflecting on her job readiness efforts, including training and experience as a Work First participant; She has been working for her check in a hospital setting for over a year waiting to be hired permanently

“. . . I’ve been on and off of public aid for about over 15 years. . . . I’ve had jobs on and off. And I entered this program, Casa Central, on the northwest side of Chicago, back in April I believe — no, February. And we had to do like six weeks training. They had like home healthcare. I’m forgetting everything. I took up job readiness and a couple of other classes they had. It was okay. But then I started getting disgusted because I couldn’t find no jobs, and I stopped going. They started sending us out to look for a job and I got disgusted and stopped going. And the next thing I know I got a letter saying that they was going to cut my check off if I didn’t get back in the program which was Asian Human Services.

. . . Everything that I filled out about [the Responsibility and Services Plan], the jobs that I’ve been going on, interviews, is not exactly with that because [contractors] are being pressured into ‘You got to get her into something, you got to get her into something.’ ”

Ernie, TANF recipient and Work First participant with children aged 26, 13, and 9

“Listen I’ve got something to say. This five-year thing, saying if you’ve been on public aid for five years or something like that. It goes way back because I just applied for public aid, when was it — in February or March okay, but I still haven’t got my cash money, or just regular Food Stamps. And I went over [to IDHS] and they told me that I got some months to go. And I’m like but why? You know what I mean. But it was because my mother had me on public aid, you know what I mean, my mother was receiving public aid for me. So they discontinued my — they cut off my five years because of my mother.

... I’ve been trying to apply for cash money, you know what I mean, because I couldn’t go to work, I couldn’t go to school, you know what I mean? But it takes [IDHS] too long. And I told them my situation, you know what I mean? You know, I need some food. I need some cash; I’ve got this baby coming up and everything. And I need an emergency [assistance], you know, and they didn’t want to help me.”

Glo, recently gave birth to her third child, TANF terminated previously for noncompliance

“We have a problem . . . because nobody can help for translation or conversation in public aid. My relatives took time helping, but everybody work.

... So many people from different countries, many people can’t speak English very well and probably public aid has more people who are bilingual. . . . There are many Russian people who have big problem for conversation. People don’t understand what case manager explain, made mistake and lost all benefits.”

Tanya, Russian refugee and former TANF recipient with one daughter

“[IDHS] don’t do nothing but push you in a room with like 50 other people that you don’t know. They give you some little books and you don’t even know what the books are talking about. They don’t even explain it. They just say here and they tell you to sign your name on the paper. They give you like two bus cards and give you a paper and tell you to go over here and go over there. Then when you go to the place, the people don’t even know who you are. They’re like, ‘Well who sent you over here? Ain’t nobody called us and told you, you need to be over here.’”

Kisha, reflecting on her job readiness assessment

“TANF has been pretty good because if it weren’t for them I would probably be in the streets right now. I could stand a little more because these kids — that’s a whole lot. If anybody don’t have six kids, don’t try to get six.”

Pat Jones, TANF recipient of several years

“I’m from Oak Park but I was in LaGrange, right, because of my [domestic violence] situation. And then I ended up here, okay, in the city. And [IDHS] said that you can’t transfer cases here in the city. You have to keep it LaGrange. So, I wasn’t getting anything, nothing. I went through like six caseworkers back and forth, okay. . . . And it was actually support from other people and then coming [to Asian Human Services], and, yes sir, working with you guys. And it just motivated me to just go and, you know, just go and get a job. But [TANF] was very hard to get; I only got, like I said, I only got one check.”

Cory, TANF recipient and mother of two, reflecting on her experience prior to recent employment

“I don’t know about that document [RSP]. I don’t remember signing that document or receiving any information about it.”

Dama, TANF recipient

“. . . It was like a book that they ask you questions. There’s so many questions they ask you. Well, I went back to the aid office Tuesday, they pulled the same book out and told me, ‘Oh, we lost it. We have to do this all over again.’ I said, see that is wrong on y’all part. Y’all lose stuff and then I have to sit here another whole hour and answer all them old stupid questions because it’s the same questions over and over again, just turned around in a different way.”

Dar, TANF recipient reflecting on an IDHS office experience

“I haven’t been in the [TANF] program that long. I was laid off my job after 18 years so this is something new for me. That’s why I’m moving out of the place that I’m in to somewhere else temporarily until I can do better. . . . I mean I depend on somebody else to buy my son his uniforms for school when I never had a problem with buying his uniforms for school, okay. . . . I never wanted to be in this program, you know I was hoping — I always worked because this is the first time I have ever been on public assistance since my son was born. I worked since he was 6 weeks old.”

Cat, recent TANF recipient with a 13-year-old son

“When I asked my caseworker if I could come to Chicago Commons for my GED or training, her response was no. I was told that I had to go to work, period, and that was that.

. . . They cut my benefits three times. The last time they did, it was May. They stated that I showed up late to an appointment, which is not true. They cut me off for one month with no Food Stamps and cash. They said that I missed an appointment. This month they sanctioned me for the same reason. My appointment was for August 10, and I did show up. They cut my Food Stamps.”

Ralle, TANF recipient

“The majority of clients state that the IDHS office fails to look at their individual barriers. The IDHS caseworker is focused on getting them a job and nothing else. The caseworkers do not appear concerned about the clients’ needs, and are mainly concerned about getting them into a placement where they can fulfill their monthly requirements. Clients have stated to me that it seems most important that the caseworkers get them into someplace where they will no longer be responsible for the client. Often, IDHS will classify a client as “engaged” which means they have work experience, however, after we do our assessment with the client, we find out that they are illiterate, have no work experience, are in a violent relationship or have unaddressed substance abuse issues.”

Provider of employment services

“I have a client who is getting, I think, \$414 a month cash and, only his apartment is \$800 — because he doesn’t speak English and he wants to be closer to his brother who speaks English.”

Anka, provider of employment services

I'M A MOTHER TOO.



JOHN BROOKS

“I need a one-on-one person, which I can trust, which I confide in because not even my mother, not even my family; I took my son over there and in two hours, ‘Take your son, take him, take him.’ All right, I need someone that I know for sure is going to come in the morning, give my son his medication, give my son the time. . . . I need somewhere where I know my son’s going to for sure, for sure be treated like a child, you know and not be treated, ‘Oh you bother.’”

Rika, speaking of her need for suitable childcare for her behaviorally disabled son

“This program here [Women in Transition] that TANF put me in, it’s been pretty helpful. All I’m looking for is to find me a job because I have three sons to raise. . . . TANF is a great help; I’m not saying that the check can stretch a whole lot, but it does help, you know, make the ends meet.”

Ann James, TANF recipient

“This is my first time on a TANF [Work First] program and I don’t know what to expect. And I hope after this program that I have some kind of job that I could afford to take care of my kids with.”

Terry Smith, TANF recipient and mother of an adult daughter, 22-year-old disabled son, and a 7-year-old daughter

“Just like with my nails. I do it. I stick the little fillers on. I can’t go and get them done. You know, that’s \$25 for that. I go get the dollar pack and I glue; I stick them on and call it a day. You know, if you go with the Salvation Army. You wash the clothes. You get that iron. You press it out, put a little starch in it. You put it in the kid’s closet; you know what I’m saying. The kids just go for it. You ain’t got to come home and say, yeah, well I been at the thrift store.

. . . You have a child. You want that child in some kind of daycare. ‘We want you to work. We want you to work right away. . . .’ I’ve seen things with kids and all this. I didn’t want my baby to be in any care. That’s the way I felt. I wanted him, if anything happened, that he could tell me what happened.”

Ms. Mac, TANF recipient and mother of five children

“My only thing though now is that by me being still the lowest person on the totem pole at my work, I have hours like the night hours, traveling. Like sometimes I work from 5:30 until 2:00 in the morning or from 6:00 until 2:30 in the morning. That’s my only thing about traveling at night because I would like to be there, even though I’m there to see my children off for school, by my daughter being 13 I would like to be there at night when she come home, you know.

. . . Okay, by me working the hours that I work, I would feel better if I had somebody there with my daughter, you know what I’m saying, she’s 13. . . . You know I would like if somebody was there with her that I could pay to be there, instead of using all my money to have to pay the bills and stuff like that.”

Vina, TANF recipient and mother of four adolescents, reflecting on her workshift and her desire for safe, childcare support for 13-year-olds

“. . . There is not enough childcare. Some childcare is not very good.”

Ralle, TANF recipient

“The reason I got on public aid, because at the time I had my first child, he was just, he had asthma. So I felt like my time should be with my children and it’s good that they had a program that would provide for those who wasn’t able to work. So, I’ve been on since then, and then I ended up having another child with a disability. And like they say, children first, and that’s my first priority. The best I could do was to give to my children whether I could give to them financially.”

Dar, TANF recipient and mother of three children aged 18, 10, and 13

YOU THINK THIS IS EASY?



JOHN BROOKS

“When I was six months pregnant I went to the public aid office. . . . I went in there and the man who, that processed my application said that he went into the new supervisor, she’s going to take care of it immediately, and in 30 days I would get a check. A month and a half later I got back to the public aid office. I had to reapply with a woman who only took care of Food Stamps and not cash assistance. She didn’t process my application either, so we went on my birthday. I went and I had to apply again with a man who said that he was going to do everything for me. I would be approved immediately. I shouldn’t worry. . . . Two weeks before I was due I started calling him because I hadn’t heard anything from public aid. I got the run around. I called him and left him four messages a day for two weeks, even on the weekends, and he never returned any of my calls. Finally, two days before my due date I went in and I was told that nobody from the beginning had put any of my information into the computer, that I had to wait to be approved. . . . So then the supervisor of that man came in and started threatening me saying that why did I need [TANF]? Was I sure I needed it? I could start working, I could do this, I could do that. And then a few days later I was told to talk to two more people who were supposed to handle my case. By this time . . . I was about to go into the hospital because I was like in really strong labor, and they wanted me to come in so that they could try to interview me again. And I was scared that I was going to have to wait another 45 days that I couldn’t wait because I couldn’t afford to buy anything for my daughter for another 45 days. But they did finally give me the money. . . .”

Becca, recent TANF recipient with 2-month-old daughter

“There’s times when you go to public aid and you’ll be there from 9:00 until like 3:00 in the afternoon and while your appointment was at 9:30.”

Rika, TANF recipient

“. . . My caseworker wasn’t there. So, they transferred me to another lady that they told me I could speak to. This lady was rude to me. She hung up the phone on me. I called again; I asked to speak to her again. She blew me off. I asked to speak to her supervisor and her supervisor acted like, you know, like I was nothing, I was nothing.”

Ruthie’s experience when, working 25 hours and going to school, she called to inquire about why she was denied cash assistance

“When I applied for public aid, it was kind of hard. It was a lot of paperwork involved. You had to have exactly the right papers or you were constantly coming back to the office. I’ve been looking for work. I’ve been employed on and off.”

Ms. Mac, TANF recipient with four children, aged 22 to 4

“It’s big, big problem get again medical because I try. My husband and me started with \$8 an hour and wasn’t enough for pay the insurance. [My husband’s employer] insurance — after three months to get benefits and I after six months. And we try to get, no get; [IDHS] told us no.

. . . [Bosnian people] have big problem. They started working. They using TANF and after they used TANF, they started working. And a lot of companies in America, they don’t have insurance, health insurance. And, okay, they get \$8.60 per hour, but if they have \$8.60 after eight months or maximum one year, they close Medicaid. And problem is familiar: they got three, four children and they are from five until 13 years.”

Muba, Bosnian refugee and former TANF recipient, received cash assistance and Food Stamps with her husband and two children for six months before employment

“I’m working at a work site 30 hours a week, five days a week for my [\$377 monthly] public aid check. I work very hard and I hate going there and work the way I do for that little public aid check. But that’s what my income for now is. . . . I have gone to school, got my GED; I got a certificate in electronics.

. . . You know they stop childcare when the child gets 13, but if you leave that 13 year old at home, you’re neglecting them. But you’ve got to get out here to do what you’ve got to do, take care of your family.”

Dar, TANF recipient

“I have a daughter 14 years old. I have been begging for money from public aid for four years. I worked for 30 years. The last company I worked for 23 years. The reason I stopped working was because I got hurt in an accident. Otherwise, I would be working. I said begging because that’s what you’re doing with DHS. They treat you so bad. I almost feel like they are going to hit me.

. . . It is not easy. You apply and you feel intimidated. They say, come back in three months. In those three months, what are you supposed to do? Tighten your stomach? Don’t eat? And after the period of waiting for their decision — it has been denied, you have to reapply and that can take a lot more time.”

Beni, TANF recipient

“So I remember I went to my caseworker, and he was like, I mean he was so irate. He was like, ‘What’s wrong with you? Why you can’t get the job? We send you this, this, and this.’ I said for one, I said you’re sending me to places and they’re asking me questions that I do not have the answers to. I said we have not learned that. I said you were giving us places. We hadn’t conducted, like a interview, to say one-on-one what you would say, you see what I’m saying, like you quizzing me and all of this. . . . I remember it was one place, it was like an accountant place. . . . And it was like, ‘What is the ratio of 7 12/8 and 6/7’, and [the interviewer], he’s like (tapping fingers) . . . and I’m like sitting there like a fool.

. . . The last job interview we went to, this lady, she had just had her baby. She was on public aid. . . . And she was like, ‘They told me I got to get a job.’ And she’s there at the interview down on the floor changing this baby, you know. And then they told her you can’t bring the baby in the interview. So, she had to just give the baby to somebody that was in the office. This Spanish lady was like, ‘I’ll hold the baby.’ Didn’t know this woman. She could have just walked off with the baby. She didn’t know this woman. But she was so desperate from her situation that she had to give her baby to somebody to go in for this interview, you know.”

Ms. Mac, TANF recipient, reflecting on job search requirements and experiences

“The first time I went and applied, my caseworker, well the caseworker I have now is not the one I applied with. But the first person I talked to when I went and applied after my unemployment ran out made me feel like I was the lowest person in the world because I had got laid off my job. And because I had to come and beg them for some assistance. . . . And that’s what I told her, I went to school just like you did. It’s not like I’m just sitting on my butt trying to get an aid check. I want a job but right now, I have to feed my son, so I’m doing what I have to do. [TANF] was out there for us, for help for us, so why not give it to us until we can do better. Not make us feel like we’re a part of a piece of scum under their shoe.”

Cat, employed previously in a law office for 18 years

“And they hold us — they hold that over our heads because we are TANF recipients. You know we receive this money. They actually hold it over our head. ‘Oh well, you ain’t nothing. You are going to receive that TANF all your life.’”

Ann James, TANF recipient

“Now [IDHS] keep[s] a folder. . . . And you see, ‘Well this person didn’t have, didn’t have a GED or this person didn’t have a high school diploma.’ And then as you go further up you see, ‘Oh this person managed to go to school and they made that accomplishment. They got their GED. Okay they took up a trade too and they did that. Okay they went to this site and they worked at that site. They got this training and that training.’ And instead of them looking at from where you’re going to where you was and where you’re going and how far you’ve made it, they keep putting pressure and pressure on you. If you’re stressed out, you can’t do anything. It takes a strong person to keep on going and survive through these hard times. And it’s hard right now, really hard.”

Dar, reflecting on her experiences on TANF

“So when I finally received SSI [for my son] and it was \$530 a month I decided to get my own apartment because I was under domestic violence. You know, so I was like, move out. So, when I moved out it was hard for me because I was paying \$400 in rent and I had to buy food. I didn’t have no Food Stamps. So, what I had to do was go to the Human Resource Service, like where they give you food and stuff like that and where they pay your light and your gas. And you know, public aid still after I did all that, didn’t want to help me out. You know I tried my best. I was not going to leave my son in the street or me. So first they gave it to me, they gave me Food Stamps. They started giving me Food Stamps but then I don’t know where and why, six months later they cut me off.”

Rika, TANF recipient

“[IDHS] did not give any referral to go to school. I had to do it myself, find a place for training. They also stated to me that I have to look for my own childcare provider. I explained to them that I recently arrived in this city, and that I didn’t know anybody. And I didn’t know the city. My caseworker promised me that she would help me to find a child care provider, and in a month she would let me know about a childcare provider. I never received a call from her.

. . . It is not easy to communicate with your caseworker. You feel like they are going to bite your head off. And they deny you assistance. And they cancel your case or threaten to cut off your grant.”

Dama, TANF recipient

“Out of all those [case] workers that I’ve been through, there was two of them that, yeah, were sensitive to the [domestic violence] situation.”

Cory, TANF recipient

“Sometimes I paid the rent late and the landlord was after me, screaming at me. Medicaid doesn’t cover the medications my husband needs. I have to ask for a loan to buy his medication. My gas bill is over \$1000 in debt. I asked DHS if they can help with this bill and they stated that there were no funds available. My light bill is also behind. I have so much debt that what I receive is not enough. . . . Three months ago, they cancelled my case. According to them I missed an appointment. They sent me a letter that I never received. . . . I had to reapply all over again, going through all the paper work. The waiting period was one month. I had to ask a family member for help. I had to talk to the landlord. He asked us to leave the apartment.”

Cristy, TANF recipient with limited English skills, two children, and a husband with health problems

“I was going to job fairs, you know. . . . [Someone] had called DCFS. . . . The worker came out to my house. They wanted to see all my kids.”

Brenda B., TANF recipient and mother of four adolescents

“Most of them; all of them who come here don’t have any U. S. work experience. . . . They can’t fill out an application; they don’t know what to put.

. . . Language is a number one problem. . . . I have people who are afraid to leave their apartment because they think they are going to get lost. I had a client, she’s American and was living in Chicago; I think north part of the city. She has never been to downtown.

. . . But for the client, I have to push them. I have to tell them and they already have so many problems: housing, no money.

When we get clients they are supposed to be job ready. . . but substance abuse is a problem.”

Anka, provider of employment services reflecting on Work First clients and placement timelines

“There’s not enough money for substance abuse [assessment and treatment].”

Lil, provider of employment services

YOU SEE WHAT I'M SAYING?



JOHN BROOKS

“It’s like the more they’re trying to change [welfare], the more they are forgetting people.”

Vina, former TANF recipient

“A lot of people don’t have the education, and they just pick you up and say, ‘Well, go to this job or go to this.’ And a lot of people, you know, it takes, you know, you’ve got to have a sort of way to do the resume and application. . . . You got to know what location means and all of this. A location is the whole address, the zip code and all that. You know what I’m saying? And all these things that you wouldn’t really think about. . . . You haven’t learnt it. You don’t know it.”

Ernie, TANF recipient of several years

“I’ll tell you like this about me, if nothing else gets paid, the rent’s going to get paid. Because I can go beg a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. I can go over into somebody’s house and say, ‘Can I get some rice or a bag of potatoes for 99 cents’ and we’ll go with that. You know what I’m saying. I’ve always tried to keep the roof. The lights might have went off a few times, you know. We might not have had a phone a few times, you know. We wasn’t into the cable thing, you know, but as far as anything when you got five kids, you keep that roof over their heads. . . . I’ve been in friends’ homes where the whole house is like a bedroom. You walk in the door, somebody’s bed is here, somebody’s bed is there, somebody’s bed is there. . . . You’re not looking at your couch and your table and all that. That’s like luxuries. We ain’t going there. . . . The most that you might buy is you might say, ‘Let me go get me a \$2 or \$3 iron’ — You know what I’m saying? — ‘so we can, might, look a little decent and stuff when we go out.’ But you don’t know what’s in my house? You see what I’m saying? When I walked out the door, you’re just looking and saying, ‘Well, she’s got a roof above her head, blah, blah, blah.’ You don’t know what the situation inside is.”

Ms. Mac, welfare recipient of several years, mother of five children ranging in age from 22 through 4

“And I’m looking for me a good paying job, okay? And my experience, what I like to do is I worked at a grocery and factory where we made fruit baskets. I did cashier work before. I did home care work before. I really want to be a stock girl at a K-Mart or a Walgreen’s or something like that, you know.”

Ann James, TANF recipient

“But I also know that \$278 is not going to do much and I’m still — I have job skills. I’ve graduated out of college. I graduated out of high school. So, it’s not like I don’t have the skills. I worked for a lawyer for 18 years so I’m just trying to get myself back in the door. It’s just a matter of getting there. I’ve been doing the job thing, putting in resumes and everything, it’s just waiting on somebody to call and say, ‘Okay, you’ve got the job,’ That’s all I’m waiting on. So right now, the best thing for me to do is pack up and stay where I can help somebody else and get a little, you know, don’t be so stressed out from, you know, knowing. . . . And I’d rather live with somebody else, with a family member, than just be homeless. And I would not let my son go through that.”

Cat, new TANF recipient and mother of a 13-year-old son

“Okay, if you go on a job for like say typing or receptionist, and you’re going to work this job, you’re working there two months. And these people aren’t paying you. I figure that if you’re going there, they should — for them to have you to come there; they should have some kind of expectation on hiring. You see what I’m saying? Don’t have a person come to your job, work three months. You’re not paying them. You’re getting paid by [IDHS] which might be, like I said, with one child \$200 and something for that whole month, just this set payment. And you working there and working there thinking that, well, I might get hired here because I’ve been working here. I got the experience. I’ve been working here three months. . . . And then they say, ‘Well, we’ve decided we have enough people here, and we’re not hiring right now.’ You see what I’m saying? What is the point of that? What was the point of you — what was the point of me coming over there slaving for you for?”

. . . That subsidize is over. Now, we ready to put you somewhere else. Now, the next place that I’m supposed to be heading is the Meals on Wheels or whatever to go clean the old people’s house and to cook food. Like I said, so how long am I going to be over there before they say, ‘Well, we don’t want you here.’ You see what I’m saying?”

Ms. Mac, TANF recipient reflecting on subsidized placements in the Work First program

“When I first got on it was [AFDC] and don’t get me wrong, I agree with, they have helped me with my child because I didn’t have anything. So, that was a help. And I did what I was able to do with the little money and the Food Stamps that they did provide for me. But as far as the TANF program, I mean, me myself, I can’t speak for no one else but me, myself by me only having the one child, that’s able, you know nothing is wrong with her, you know there’s nothing wrong with me. I should work. You know I have some problems as far as asthmatic, you know it’s kind of bad. You know certain things I might not be able to do like as far as factory because of the atmosphere. You know I can’t do that for the respiratory reasons. But other little things, you know, clerical or stocking or cash register, you know right now I’m not even really being choosy about a job. I’ve gotten too old to be choosy, I just need work to help take care of and provide for my daughter until she’s able to provide for herself and myself, you know.”

D. Anderson, welfare recipient of several years with a 17-year-old daughter

“Okay, you get a job right. I mean it ain’t paying you no great money, seven something an hour. You’re working 40 hours a week. You’re living in an apartment paying 500 something dollars rent, light, gas. You can’t — and you’ve got children to take care of and they just cut you off all at once. . . . Okay, you’ve got to be under a certain amount and they might still give you a little money and stamps. But people with one child it don’t make no difference how much you make, you’re going to make more than what they’re going to give you a month. So therefore, they’re going to take the money.”

Dar, reflecting on TANF work supports

“I was hurt on my job last, like in ’99. So I had to come back to apply for TANF. And I met with my caseworker and the reason why I wasn’t working then is because I was hurt on my job and my wrist and my elbow was broke. And the line of work that I’m in is I’m a licensed cook. So, I couldn’t perform the duties that I needed to. So my caseworker informed me that I wasn’t doing anything but sitting at home even though I had a broken wrist and a broken elbow and that I needed to get back out. . . . Because it was unfair that I had to stop my therapy for my wrist and my elbow because she was saying I wasn’t doing anything but sitting at home and I had a cast and I had doctor’s statements and everything. But because she felt I was just sitting at home, to not get the hassle from her, I just went on back to work. So I wouldn’t have to, you know, even deal with the system.”

Vina, TANF recipient and mother of four adolescents

“A lot of women are trying their best to do better. But [IDHS] don’t want to give them that time to try, you know they like set up a certain amount of time that you’ve got to do this, you’ve got to do this. It doesn’t always work that way.

. . . But I’ve seen every woman in this program has been going to the job fairs. I mean I’ve come here to give everybody information about, when I find out about a job, you know, I’m like you all want it, go and check it out. You know you might get a job if I don’t . . . They don’t think we’re serious about it. Nobody wants to sit at home and get that little check. Everybody wants to be out there being productive, knowing that they can do better for themselves and their children.”

Cat, reflecting on the need for a more flexible system

“In my experience, the barriers clients face prove they need continuous case management prior to, during, and after they become employed. When you have never worked before you need to learn a lot of things and I think we expect too much of the clients. It would be good for someone to check-in with clients after their employment because things come up and they do not know how to handle them and they quit their jobs and are left with no one to turn to. No contractors are given those extra funds to do more than six months retention and that is unfair. Clients really need intensive case management and many providers do not have the capabilities to provide this service once the clients become employed. Clients are basically left out in the cold after they become employed.”

Provider of employment services

“I have a lot of foreigners, a lot of refugees from Bosnia, so they don’t really go to a big company to get a job. They go to either relatives or friends who have some kind of company and they’re not getting medical benefits from them, and so it’s really important to them to keep the medical they are getting from DHS.

. . . They cannot drive, they cannot read, so they cannot get driver’s license. And the jobs that we can find for them, a lot of let say, Bosnians, a lot of [them] came 20 to 30 years ago. They have their construction companies, stores, but that’s not in the city. It’s not really close to the client so if we have to send them to . . .Gurnee, Waukegan – there’s no way they can get there.”

Anka, provider of employment services

“They want to go to work.

. . . What will happen now that all the placements are frozen, due to what happened on September 11th? They’re not hiring. We have a contract with [an airport security firm]. They’re not going to hire. What will happen. . . ? That’s a concern I have in terms of the economy. Things are not getting better, it’s getting worse. And even we have been having that concern even before what happened Tuesday. It will be much worse now.”

Lil, employment services provider

THIS COULD HELP



KATE INGOLD

“I think if the people that work for the government have people that they’re supposed to be helping, if they actually get people into a stable environment where they’ve got a place to live. If they have kids and they got their kids in school, caught up with their shots, caught up with medical, the people have medical. That the people are set up in a good job, then they can say that they have good stuff with their caseloads.”

Becca, TANF recipient

“I need childcare, my GED, and to get a good job. . . . I want a good job, but I need to have my GED to get a good job.”

Dama, TANF recipient

“If it takes you two years, at least you’re going to school as long as you keep up with your grades. I mean allow you to go to school because the grant that they give you, you aren’t going to be able to keep the grant if you don’t, if you’re failing anyway. So at least give you the chance to go out there to get something that’s going to get you financially established.”

Dar, TANF recipient and Work First participant

“The type of service or support is the one that allows you to prepare yourself, for example, to learn the language. And to get some skills and get your GED.”

Beni, TANF recipient

“I will say you need four things to get a better job: first, the GED, then training in something, the government’s support, and childcare.”

Ralle, TANF recipient

“I need childcare, to learn English, get a GED and get some kind of training. And I need to learn how to search for a good job.”

Cristy, TANF recipient

“If they were talking about a success they should help their TANF recipients be more successful. You know if they want to go to school help them go to school. If they want to do a trade, help them with a trade. Not just, you know give them a time limit, well you failed to do what you’re supposed to and just cut it off. Now that’s not success. That’s just doing people rotten and mean, you know, and anything can happen. . . . Give a person time to better themselves. You know work with them. . . .”

Ann James, reflecting her desire for program flexibility

“You come in there depressed and down. You know what I’m saying. . . . You have no confidence. [IDHS] should have some classes to first get the person motivated, wanting to do anything first.”

Cory, TANF recipient and domestic violence survivor

“On one occasion I requested some dental assistance. I was very sick and I needed to see a dentist immediately. They stated to me that they were sorry, but they did not have that type of support. They don’t have those types of referrals.”

Beni, TANF recipient

“Maybe public aid can do special courses for the people who taking TANF. . . . I know these people who are speaking, whose English, they can read and they almost get GED. And for database, no difficult, you know. And if they that get, they can contact, like public aid can contact a lot of company and tell to them, ‘Please, give to these clients education. . . .’ That means if they give example six week run special training that they don’t need pay nothing because they are on the TANF, they can find people for that. I know that.”

Muba, Bosnian refugee and former TANF recipient

“The support services that would help my clients would be for IDHS to provide resources such as uniforms, transportation, licensing fees for security blue cards or paying for other certifications such as sanitation certification, etc.

. . . I would suggest that we provide more resources for childcare. Children over 13 years old need child care in the evenings, also paying for special programs for the children such as after school activities at the YMCA or other community organizations.”

Provider of employment services

“They have to revise the sanction process.

If they want to have a 60 month limit. . . start the work when they come in. Don’t wait for the last couple of months to be caught up with that person and to put pressure on that person what to do.

. . . If a person is working on their GED, that clock should stop because they are doing a activity . . . to help them be independent from DHS.

. . . I would promote education. . . . We cannot place people with no skills because we would expose them as failures. . . . Education would be a priority — vocational training for people not able to get a GED [or] below level reading.

. . . [Testing] costs a lot of money, nearly \$150 per client . . . and we don’t have that anymore.”

Lil, employment services provider

“There should be some funds allowed to help those people who want move up; some kind of training [for] people who are working but want more.”

Anka, provider of employment services

“It would be nice [to] provide incentives for clients to get better jobs.”

Provider of employment services

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

The United States Congress will amend and/or reauthorize the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program no later than September 2002. The decisions our elected officials make will either advance the well-being and employment success of women and families like those in this publication, or consign them to destitution and working poverty.

Through your advocacy or vote you can support welfare legislation that:

- 1) Preserves and improves the “safety net” of income supports for anyone in need regardless of immigration status, parental or custodial status, marital status, or criminal background.
- 2) Builds flexibility into policies to accommodate the distinct needs and strengths of individuals in the process of moving from welfare to work.
- 3) Increases access to education and training for job seekers of all ages and abilities intent on achieving self-sufficiency.
- 4) Makes work “pay” with a range of job-and income-related supports including earnings disregards; child care, housing, and transportation assistance; Medicaid coverage; Food Stamps; child support pass-throughs; tax credits; and Individual Development Accounts.
- 5) Measures, rewards, and monitors states according to families’ meaningful educational, personal, and employment gains such as poverty reduction, educational and employment retention and advancement, and wage growth.
- 6) Invests sufficient funding for the education, training, and work-related supports that will reduce poverty and promote self-sufficiency.

Act now. Be informed. Get involved in the TANF reauthorization debate. Raise your voice in unison with those who see that America’s poorest families deserve welfare policy that promises broad income and work supports, promotes individual and family success, and puts an end to poverty.

The Chicago Jobs Council and its 100 members are committed to welfare advocacy on behalf of those without jobs, money, or position to make their voices heard. For CJC’s policy paper, *Critical Issues & Initial Answers: Recommendations for Reauthorization of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program*, or for other reauthorization advocacy information contact Senior Policy Associate, Rose Karasti, at the Chicago Jobs Council 312-252-0460, ext. 309, or rose@cjcn.net.

ABOUT CJC

Founded in 1981, the Chicago Jobs Council (CJC) is a membership organization that works to increase job opportunities for all city residents, with an emphasis on those in poverty, racial minorities, the long-term unemployed, women and others who experience systemic exclusion from employment and career mobility. With 18 original members, CJC has grown to include 100 community-based organizations, civic groups, businesses and individuals committed to helping disadvantaged Chicagoans gain access to the jobs and training they need to enter the labor market, secure stable employment at a living wage, and pursue sustainable careers.

CJC pursues its mission through advocacy, applied research, public education and capacity-building initiatives focused on influencing the development or reform of public policies and programs. Our work is grounded in the perspectives of our members, who contribute their expertise as direct service practitioners, advocates, researchers and employers. Our efforts are also guided by the results of demonstration projects that test innovative solutions to pressing employment problems. By organizing members and other interested parties around workforce development, welfare reform, economic and community development issues, CJC fosters dialogue and cooperative strategies that effect change.

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I'M TRYING
THIS COULD HELP
I'M A MOTHER TOO.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

HOW DID THEY GET HERE?

SOMETIMES YOU FEEL LIKE YOU
JUST CAN'T WIN

MINIMUM WAGES OR TANF?

YOU THINK THIS IS EASY?

MAKE SOME SENSE

SAY IT LIKE IT IS