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The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Block Grant

Introduction

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant was created in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA, P.L. 104-193). That law was the culmination of a series of legislative changes that altered the rules for providing benefits and services to needy families with children.

Brief History

Public cash assistance to needy families with children has its origin in the early 1900s state and locally financed “mother’s pension” programs that aided single mothers (often widows) so that children could be raised in their own homes rather than be institutionalized. The Social Security Act of 1935 provided federal funding for these programs with the explicit goal to aid mothers so they would not have to work and could stay home to raise their children.

Post-1935 changes altered the context in which programs for needy families with children operated. In 1939, survivors’ benefits were added to Social Security, providing social insurance benefits to widows and their children. The increase in labor force participation among married mothers altered views about whether government should aid single mothers to stay at home. Families with children whose fathers were alive but absent comprised more of the public cash assistance caseload. An increasing share of those receiving assistance were African-American. Cash assistance to needy families with children became among the most controversial of social programs, particularly beginning in the late 1960s as the cash assistance caseload had its first large increase. Proposals to replace or reform cash assistance for needy families were debated across four decades, ultimately leading to the enactment of PRWORA.

The TANF Block Grant

PRWORA and the creation of TANF altered the federal rules that applied to states for their cash assistance programs. It also ended dedicated funding for cash assistance to needy families. Federal funding for such assistance was folded into a broad-purpose block grant. The TANF block grant’s overall purpose is to “increase the flexibility of states” to meet four statutory goals: (1) provide assistance to needy families so that children may remain in their homes; (2) end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits through work, job preparation, and marriage; (3) reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancies; and (4) promote the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.

Federal Grants and State Funds

TANF provides grants to the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

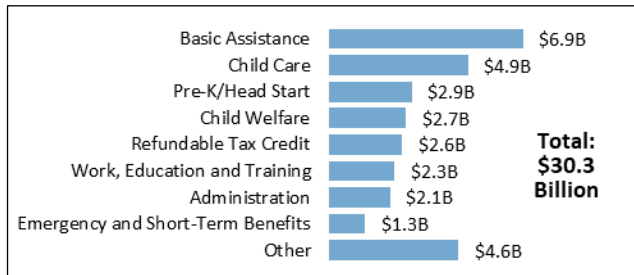
American Indian tribes may also operate their own TANF programs with federal dollars. The bulk of TANF funding is in a basic block grant of \$16.5 billion per year. Every year, each state receives a fixed grant based on how much it received in federal funding in the pre-1996 cash assistance and related programs during the early- and mid-1990s. Tribes also may receive grants based on mid-1990s expenditures.

The TANF block grant has not been increased since the enactment of the 1996 welfare law. There has been no adjustment for inflation or population change. From 1997 to 2022, the basic TANF block grant has lost 45% of its value to inflation. During TANF’s history, states have at times received TANF funds in addition to the basic block grant. Since 2011, some states have routinely tapped a “contingency fund,” that was originally intended to provide extra funding during economic recessions.

In addition to federal funding, states are required to contribute a minimum amount of nonfederal funds on the TANF-related populations and TANF-related activities. This amount is also based on historical expenditures in pre-TANF programs and is known as the “maintenance of effort” (MOE) requirement. Some states spend more than the minimum.

Use of TANF Funds

States may use federal block grant and MOE funds in any manner that is “reasonably calculated” to achieve TANF’s statutory purpose and goals. In FY2021, a total of \$30.3 billion was spent by states from federal TANF and state MOE funds. FY2021 TANF basic assistance, including monthly cash benefits to families with children, totaled \$6.9 billion. In addition to assistance, TANF contributes to state funds used for work and training programs, child care, pre-kindergarten programs, programs to provide services to children who have been abused and neglected or are at risk of it, and other services (e.g., youth activities, responsible fatherhood, healthy marriage promotion).

Figure 1. Uses of Federal TANF and State MOE Funds, by Category, FY2021 (\$ in billions)

Source: CRS, based on data from the Department of Health and Human Services. Detail does not add to total because of rounding.

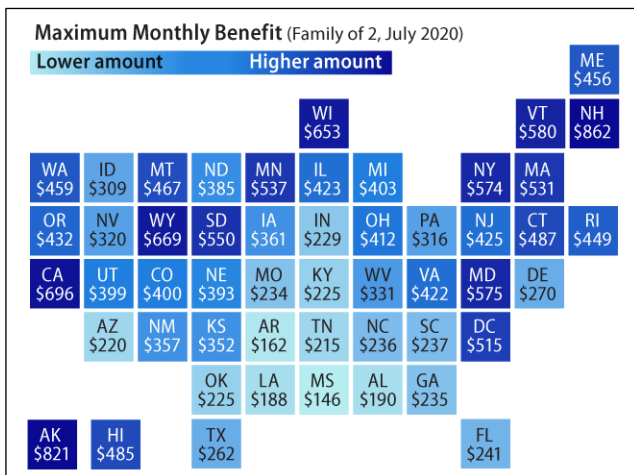
State TANF Cash Assistance Programs

Federal law requires that a family aided by TANF cash assistance have a dependent child, and limits to five years federally funded aid to families with an adult recipient. States set most TANF rules that apply to recipient families.

States determine the TANF benefit amounts. In July 2020, the maximum monthly benefit for a single-parent family with one child ranged from \$862 in New Hampshire to \$146 in Mississippi. There is a regional pattern to these maximum benefits; they are generally lowest in the South.

Figure 2. Maximum Monthly TANF Cash Assistance Benefit by State, July 2020

Single Parent, One Child



- Both the overall level of funding and its distribution among the states date back to spending in pre-TANF programs in the early-to-mid 1990s. Congress might consider updates to funding levels and/or how funding is distributed among the states.
- The almost continuous decline in the number of families receiving assistance since the mid-1990s, along with a decline in the percentage of eligible families who receive assistance, has raised questions about whether it is meeting the needs of low-income families.
- Proposals have been made in the past to target a specified percentage of funding to certain activities or target funding to specific populations, such as families with income no greater than 200% of the federal poverty level.
- Whether further changes should be made to the TANF work standards beyond those made by P.L. 118-5.

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