

## **Proposal to Sanction TANF Parents Will Harm Children and Families and Is Unlikely to Improve Children's School Attendance or Get Unmet Mental Health Needs Addressed**

Councilmember David Catania and his staff are developing proposals that would address several important issues, including unmet children's mental health needs, truancy and disconnection from supportive services. One of many proposals that Councilmember Catania will consider, as reported in [The Washington Post](#), is sanctioning (or reducing) benefits for District Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients if their children have repeated unexcused absences from school. Although we share the Councilmember's underlying concerns and strongly support his efforts to improve the delivery of mental health services to children through schools and other public and private entities, we believe that the TANF sanction proposal will be ineffective and harm the very families he wants to help for the following reasons:

**Sanctioning TANF families with truant kids does not lead to increased school attendance among TANF recipients' kids.** A 1992 study found that when parents' AFDC amounts were reduced due to a truant teenager, no improvement was realized. Instead, the study found that nearly half of the families who were sanctioned were also involved in the abuse and neglect system in Wisconsin and saw an increase in the family pressures after a sanction.<sup>1</sup>

**Sanctioning TANF families with truant kids will merely punish families who are already struggling with significant challenges.** Several analyses of sanctioned welfare recipients have shown that sanctioned families have lower levels of education than non-sanctioned participants, higher incidents of health related barriers to work – including mental health problems and domestic violence and had less work experience than non-sanctioned families.<sup>2</sup>

**The proposed policies will increase the material hardship for sanctioned families which could make it harder for them to support their children's education.** A survey of research on sanctioned families concluded, "[s]anctioned recipients are more likely to experience material hardships than their non-sanctioned counterparts. Material hardships TANF recipients face include borrowing money to pay bills or falling behind on payments, not having enough food, problems paying for medical care, and experiencing a utility shut-off."<sup>3</sup> If families are threatened with utility shutoffs, hunger or homelessness, they could be less likely to be able to support their children's school attendance.

**Children suffer when their parents are sanctioned.** One study found that infants and toddlers in sanctioned families had a 30 percent greater risk of having been hospitalized since birth and a 90 percent greater risk of being admitted to the hospital after visiting the emergency room.<sup>4</sup> Another study found that preschoolers and adolescents in sanctioned families were at a greater risk for behavioral problems and lower test scores than children in families that hadn't been sanctioned.<sup>5</sup> Increasing the prevalence of such outcomes through sanctions would presumably make it less likely that affected adolescents would regularly attend school.

**The District could better engage families and improve school attendance outcomes by improving services for vulnerable families.** These services could include an expansion of the Family Court Truancy Diversion Program as well as the implementation of evidence-based parenting programs and mental health treatment. OSSE also recently released detailed school attendance and truancy regulations that detail early intervention strategies schools are required to take to address truancy issues.

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<sup>1</sup> Lois Quinn, Using [Threats of poverty to promote school attendance: Implications of Wisconsin's Learnfare experiment for families](#). (*Journal of Children and Poverty* 1(2), 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Marcia Meyers, et al., [Review of Research on TANF Sanctions](#). (University of Washington, West Coast Poverty Center, June 2006); Heidi Goldberg and Liz Schott, [A Compliance-Oriented Approach to Sanctions in State and County TANF Programs](#). (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Oct. 1, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> LaDonna Pavetti, [Review of Sanction Policies and Research Studies](#) (Mathematica Policy Research 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Meyers, et al. (2006) (citing Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program, [Pediatricians Find TANF Sanctions Put Young Children at Risk](#). (2005)).

<sup>5</sup> Meyers, et al. (2006) (citing P. Lindsey Chase-Lansdale, et al., [Welfare Reform: What About the Children](#). Policy Brief 02-1. (Welfare Children, and Families: A Three State Study, Johns Hopkins University, 2002)).