

Statement of Executive Director Monica Peabody on Behalf of Parents Organizing for Welfare and Economic Rights (POWER)

To be included in the record of the Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support of the House Committee on Ways and Means's October 8, 2009 "Hearing on the 'Safety Net's' Response to the Recession"

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important issue. Thank you to our Congress Member McDermott for his work on behalf of his constituents living in poverty. My name is Monica Peabody and since 2007 I have served as Executive Director to Parents Organizing for Welfare and Economic Rights. POWER is an organization of low-income parents and allies advocating for a strong social safety net while working toward a world where children and care giving are truly valued, and the devastation of poverty has been eradicated. We provide legal information and advocacy skill building to low-income parents who have to turn to the safety net in order to survive. POWER was created in 2007 by members of the Welfare Rights Organizing Coalition, to continue WROC's quarter of a century tradition of fighting for the rights of low-income parents. With over 900 members throughout Washington, POWER operates on a tiny budget and relies mostly on volunteers to forward our work, which has never been more important than in our current economic times.

Eighty percent of our members are low-income parents; most are single mothers, who must rely on some part of the safety net for basic necessities for their families. Our typical family size is 1.5 children, lower than the national average of 1.83 (US Census Bureau). Our average stay on welfare cash assistance is less than two years. These statistics surprise many people, including we guess, many of the lawmakers who came up with policies such as family caps and TANF time limits. In fact, our members identified the need to shift public perception about who uses TANF benefits and why as one of our primary challenges. We spend much of our time addressing community groups, college classes, and legislative committees in an attempt to shatter the myths and stereotypes we feel lead to misperceptions and unfair policies regarding safety net services. Otherwise, how could our government allow current human rights abuses in the United States to continue?

Our typical family, a single mother and her child, who must rely solely on Washington's safety net services receives a \$453 monthly TANF grant. Fair market rents in Washington for one or two bedroom apartments are from \$500 to \$700 a month (*Schedule B of the Federal document Proposed Fair Market Rents for Fiscal Year 2008*). Washington state legislators have approved one 3% TANF grant increase in the last 16 years. This has contributed to these figures from the Washington Low Income Housing Alliance:

- *At least 50,000 people experience homelessness every year in Washington State.*
- *250,000 Washington households must make desperate choices between necessities like food and healthcare, and rent. □*
- *Families with children make up 47% of Washington's homeless population. □*
- *In 2002 there were over 81,610 households turned away from emergency shelter services in Washington State. Of those turned away, over 58,257 were households with children.*

As if living at less than 40% of the Federal Poverty Level were not enough, a parent receiving TANF in Washington must comply with the WorkFirst program and the constant threats of sanction (removal of 40% of her TANF grant, termination after 6 months). The POWER office in Olympia, Washington receives between 40 to 60 calls monthly from low-income people experiencing difficulties accessing or keeping the benefits their families need. The most common problems we see are:

1. **Access:** The forms are lengthy and confusing. Although there is a requirement that caseworkers red star and provide extra services to those needing extra accommodations due to learning disabilities, literacy, language barriers, or mental health issues, it is rare that people receive these required services. Instead we see non-English speakers and people who can't read being told in English to sign in at the computer before they can speak to their caseworker. The computer then instructs the client, in Spanish or English, to enter their social security number. Further instructions in English only say to enter all 9s if you don't have a social security number. You are getting the picture. Many who desperately need assistance leave in humiliation and despair long before they access benefits. If they have the skills to complete the application process and provide the necessary documentation, they are not told about or able to access program options like emergency assistance, support services, or education and training options.
2. **Termination:** One parent put it this way, "If I mess up on my paperwork, my kid and I go hungry, if my caseworker messes up on my paperwork, my kid and I go hungry." Receiving a termination letter is a heart stopping reality of Washington's safety net recipients. It is not unusual for a family to go without food stamps, TANF, or access to health care for several weeks, sometimes months, while their caseworker catches up on paperwork or waits for verification requests.

3. WorkFirst: We get a large number of calls from parents saying they have been sanctioned unfairly by their caseworker. That despite the fact that they have reported conditions that should result in a participation deferral: domestic violence, lack of transportation or childcare, disabilities or caretaking needs of children or relatives with disabilities, illness, or legal requirements; they are still sanctioned for nonparticipation. Those who attempt to participate report unrealistic expectations. For example, rural members are expected to drive 30 or 40 miles each day to sign in on the job search computer at the Work Source office, but are only provided a gas voucher of \$40 every two weeks. College students are told they have to participate in WorkFirst activities for 35 hours on top of their full time school schedule, bring participation requirements to over 60 hours a week. I have spoken with several parents who have fallen asleep at their car's wheel in the midst of attempting to avoid sanction.

A true safety net would recognize that the primary job of a single parent is raising happy and healthy children. A TANF grant should at least bring recipients up to 100% of the Federal Poverty Level. Participation in WorkFirst activities should be optional until a child reaches 6 years of age. Strict job search only requirements make no sense when jobs are scarce. Instead, restrictions on access to education and training should be removed and parents should receive support services, including childcare, to attend at least four years of education and training. Education and training should meet their WorkFirst requirements.

These simple changes to the safety net would strengthen our nation. Support for care giving saves money: TANF is more affordable than childcare, in-home care for the elderly and disabled can allow independence and prevent institutionalized care and hospitalization. Support for care giving saves lives. In the words of POWER Board Member, Catherine Sullivan:

We need to ask which is more important and less costly to our communities; should we be asking, "Do you want fries with that?" or should we concentrate on enabling care givers to be able to say, "It's time to sit down and do homework with you," or "Mom, after the dinner I brought for you, let's sit down and figure out the bills, OK?" The answer should be obvious.