



News Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Welfare Reform Bill Includes Some of the Recommendations Urged by the Missouri Catholic Conference

April 17, 2015 JEFFERSON CITY, MO—The Missouri General Assembly has approved a major overhaul of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program to create a more customized welfare system to help recipients move out of poverty. The legislation includes a number of the reforms advocated by the Missouri Catholic Conference (MCC) but not all of them.

Senate Bill 24 does not reduce the monthly cash benefit for recipients, but the lifetime limit for receiving those benefits is reduced from 60 to 45 months. The average stay on TANF is 22.5 months, according to the Missouri Department of Social Services, but some families remain on the program for the allowed 60 months.

According to Mike Hoey, the executive director of the MCC, the legislation could have been improved by allowing recipients more time to receive the TANF help. “These parents live in extreme poverty and have many serious obstacles to overcome before they can get and keep a job,” Hoey said. “They could have used more time.”

The MCC had urged legislators to give recipients time to adjust to the new time limit by applying it only to new applicants, but this grandfathering provision, while discussed in negotiations on the bill, was not adopted.

Sponsor Senator David Sater (R-Casseville) said the savings realized from people leaving the program would be used to provide additional help to recipients participating in the federally required work activities, which may include job training, community service, vocational education, and obtaining a high school GED.

Hardship exemptions from work activities are available for those with disabilities or if the recipient is caring for a disabled person or a child under one year of age.

During debate in the Missouri House, State Representative Diane Franklin (R-Camdenton) said it was time to stop “warehousing” and provide real help. Under the bill, additional TANF funds would be available for childcare and transportation to help parents get to a work site or attend school. Hoey noted that more help in these areas is essential if parents are to participate in the work activities.

Senate Bill 24 would also remove the current “marriage penalty” in TANF so that if a recipient marries, the income and assets of the new spouse is disregarded for six months. In addition, the bill authorizes \$4.3 million in funding for new programs promoting marriage and responsible fatherhood. Single mothers head most TANF households. Only 12 percent of TANF recipients are married.

Hoey said the Missouri Catholic Conference played a key role in adding these provisions to the bill: “Social researchers of all political stripes agree that forming strong two-parent families can help households move out of poverty.”

Under the bill the Missouri Department of Social Services will provide an orientation for new recipients so they can learn about the services available through TANF and the consequences of not complying with required work activities. At present, phone interviews are often used to qualify applicants. “The lack of personal interaction has meant that most recipients never see a caseworker or develop a roadmap for moving out of poverty,” Hoey said.

Currently recipients can lose 25 percent of their cash benefit for failure to participate in work activities, but no further sanction is imposed. Senate Bill 24 establishes a two-step process, starting with a 50 percent sanction and, if the recipient continues in noncompliance, the imposition of a full family sanction whereby the case is closed.

The MCC opposed the full family sanction, noting that the children need help even if their parents are not complying with work requirements. When the full family sanction was not removed from the bill, the MCC sought and obtained the provisions requiring the face-to-face meetings with recipients before sanctions could be imposed.

TANF is a federal block grant program that gives states wide discretion on how to structure their program and spend the TANF dollars. At present Missouri receives over \$217 million annually. Only about 4 percent of the monies are currently used to fund work activities. “Not enough TANF funds are used to support the work activities at this time but SB 24 will provide new money,” Hoey said.

The Missouri House added funding for alternatives to abortion. Opponents questioned this move but supporters said local pregnancy resource centers do an effective job of helping low-income women not only avoid an abortion but start a new life. “If TANF operated more like the pregnancy resource centers we would have a far better program,” Hoey said.

At present there are a little over 31,000 households considered active TANF cases. According to the Missouri Department of Social Services, 3,155 have received TANF for 45 months or longer and would lose their cash assistance when SB 24 goes into effect next January. Supporters of SB 24 believe that once recipients are informed of the new time limit they will adjust their plans and exit TANF earlier.

Senate Bill 24 now moves to Governor Nixon’s desk for his consideration. A veto of the bill could spur legislators to override the veto. Both chambers passed the bill by overwhelming majorities—25 to 9 in the Missouri Senate and 111 to 36 in the House.

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The Bishops of Missouri, speaking together on matters of public policy, form the Missouri Catholic Conference