

## INTERRELIGIOUS WORKING GROUP ON DOMESTIC HUMAN NEEDS

January 26, 2004

Dear Senator:

As the Senate prepares to vote on legislation to reauthorize the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, we urge you to call for TANF reauthorization that seeks to reduce poverty as its primary goal. This goal is urgent in today's economy.

The signatories to this letter represent faith-based organizations and denominations that collectively represent millions of Americans. We have consistently worked to communicate our priorities regarding TANF reauthorization with Members of Congress. We selected these priorities to reflect our faith traditions, which consistently express concern for the most vulnerable members of society, including members of our own communities and congregations. Our faith traditions require both individual and social responsibility when addressing the needs of people who are poor. We believe that the suggestions that follow will lead to the reduction of poverty among TANF recipients, allowing their families to achieve greater economic stability.

The Senate Finance Committee-passed legislation, Personal Responsibility and Individual Development for Everyone (PRIDE), reflects some of our priorities including allowing states to distribute more child support funds directly to families, extending Transitional Medicaid for five years, including the Parents as Scholars program, and requiring states to conduct a pre-sanction review before reducing a family's cash assistance grant.

However, we are **extremely disappointed** that PRIDE fails to address several of our major concerns. We are especially alarmed that it fails to include adequate funding for child care, the restoration of benefits for immigrants, necessary expansion for education and training, and the maintenance of the current work requirement, particularly the work requirement for parents of pre-school children.

**We urge you to call for and support the following amendments** to PRIDE when it reaches the Senate floor:

Increase funding for **child care** by at least \$6 billion above the Finance committee bill by supporting a bipartisan amendment by Senator Snowe. For states that keep waiting lists, the lists are long and growing. The Congressional Budget Office has estimated it would cost \$4.5 billion in additional child care funding over five years simply to compensate for the effects of inflation and thereby avert a reduction in current child care services or child care slots.

Support the restoration of full benefits to immigrants, including access to federal TANF money, SCHIP and Medicaid services, child care, and appropriate education and training. At the very least, allow states the option to use TANF block grant funds to serve documented immigrants. Immigrants make vital contributions to our nation as taxpayers, workers, and neighbors.

Retain the current work requirement of 20 hours per week for **parents of pre-school children**.

Retain the **current work requirement** of 30 hours per week because it fits the realities of the low-wage labor market and because the state fiscal crises have made it extremely difficult to obtain work. Increasing the work requirement would also create bureaucratic problems in reporting and would be too hard for the states to enforce.

Expand access to **education and training** by allowing it to count toward the core work hours for 24 months with no participation caps. Many skills or job training programs are 24 months in duration and would enable individuals to pursue higher levels of work.

Remove the “**superwaiver**” provision that gives up to 10 states authority to waive federal laws to coordinate TANF, SSBG, and child care programs. This language could give states unprecedented authority to eliminate standards and protections in programs serving low-income families.

Review **personal and structural barriers** that affect TANF recipients’ ability to work before imposing sanctions. A single barrier may prevent successful employment, and over one-third of TANF recipients must overcome three or more barriers. For instance, PRIDE allows only 6 months for treatment to overcome severe barriers to employment to count in the core 24 hours. This is arbitrary and inadequate; states should be allowed to count activities to overcome barriers toward the core requirement for longer than 6 months if the need is documented. **Support a bipartisan amendment** based on S. 1523 by Senator Gordon Smith.

We look forward to your response. If you have questions or concerns, do not hesitate to contact Carolyn Race with the Presbyterian Church (USA) at (202) 543-1126 or Yonce Shelton with Call to Renewal at (202) 328-8745.

Sincerely,

American Baptist Churches USA

American Friends Service Committee - Washington Office

Bread for the World

Call to Renewal

Church Women United

The Episcopal Church, USA

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Jewish Council for Public Affairs

Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office

National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd

National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA

NETWORK, A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Washington Office

Union for Reform Judaism

Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations

Unitarian Universalist Service Committee

United Church of Christ, Justice & Witness Ministries

United Methodist General Board of Church and Society

Women of Reform Judaism