



A TWO-GENERATION APPROACH FOR TANF IN WASHINGTON STATE

Women – especially single women with children – are disproportionately more likely to be low income due to structural economic disadvantages, such as lower pay for the industries they are primarily employed in, a persistent wage gap, and lack of access to family-friendly policies like abundant, affordable child care and paid sick leave. These barriers make it difficult to find or keep a living wage job, and limit the amount of time low income women can spend at work.

We are seeking funding to restructure Washington state’s WorkFirst program (our version of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) using a two-generation approach to overcome low income women’s barriers to employment and break the cycle of poverty for their children. The employment barriers low income women face are not much different than anyone who has a difficult time finding work or is unemployed. Many middle-class people, for example, became unemployed during the recession and needed public assistance in the form of unemployment insurance to make ends meet until they found another job. Yet low income women, especially those with children, have historically faced considerable stigma when applying for public benefits, which are accessed through a different system than unemployed people generally. Having two separate systems perpetuates stereotypes of who is “deserving” and “undeserving” of public assistance. In addition, resources available through WorkFirst are not concentrated in the areas that would benefit low income women and children the most – namely, a career pathway to a living wage job and access to affordable, high quality early learning opportunities that prepare children to succeed in school and life.

Our goals are to:

1. Strengthen the WorkFirst program by using a two-generation approach that concentrates resources on programs that (a) provide the work supports (e.g., child care), education, and training opportunities that low income women need to pave the way for a career path that leads to economic security; and (b) overcomes the challenges low income children face by supporting high quality early learning opportunities, therefore increasing their chances for success in school and life.
2. Build support among key stakeholders for the creation of a single point of entry for anyone who is unemployed, including low income women. By creating a single unemployment program, we hope to destigmatize social benefits for women, and ensure equity and dignity for all who are unemployed, regardless of gender or social class.

The timing is right to pursue these goals. First, Washington state transferred control of WorkFirst from the Governor to the Legislature last year, providing new opportunities to restructure the program in the future. Second, we have a new Governor and Secretary of Department of Social and Health Services, who have both expressed interest in finding innovative solutions for WorkFirst. Our Speaker of the House has also expressed a willingness to work with advocates on strengthening the program. Finally, we have a strong group of WorkFirst advocates who are interested in working with us on our goals.

Our approach also maximizes the likelihood of success. We will combine research to document the structural inequities low income women face, strong communications to reframe the issues, and outreach to build political will. We have already laid the groundwork to begin this work in Summer 2013, and have strong credibility and partnerships with all of the key stakeholders.