



# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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April 1, 2021

*Testimony of Rep. Michele Meyer presenting*

## **LD 78, An Act to Protect Children from Extreme Poverty by Preserving Children's Access to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Benefit**

*Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services*

Senator Claxton and esteemed colleagues of the Health and Human Services Committee, I am Rep. Michele Meyer, and I am here this morning to proudly introduce **LD 78, An Act to Protect Children from Extreme Poverty by Preserving Children's Access to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Benefit**.

Currently, if one parent in a family receiving a TANF benefit is noncompliant with the provisions of the contract entered into in order to receive the benefit, the entire family is terminated from the assistance.

This full-family sanction leaves the compliant parent and the children without income to pay their rent, purchase basic necessities, keep the lights on. Under these circumstances, children in deep poverty are disqualified from desperately needed assistance as a result of one parent's sanction.

This bill would change that policy. Rather than remove the entire family from TANF, it would remove the noncompliant parent from the benefit calculation. For example, if a family includes two parents and two children, their benefit is calculated based on their income and the needs of a family of four. If one parent is unwilling or unable to comply with the family contract – say Mom doesn't participate in ASPIRE meetings or work requirements – the benefits would be recalculated for a family of three, Dad and the two kids. Under a partial-family sanction, the non-compliant parent would be held accountable without punishing the compliant parent and children.

Who are these families receiving TANF? They are your neighbors. They are among each of the constituencies we serve. It's the woman working the register where you buy your groceries or the young Dad mowing lawns and studying for his GED. It's a single mom working toward a college degree with an eye on the prize: self-sufficiency. And, at one time in my life, it was me.

Thirty-one years ago, I was a TANF recipient. It was then called Aid to Families with Dependent Children, or AFDC. I found myself alone with two very young children, living in a small rental in a rural village, no job, few marketable skills, no reliable child care, no family to help, no car, no savings, broke. With few options to keep us housed and fed, I swallowed my pride and summoned up the courage to apply for welfare.

For a little over two years, I stretched every dollar and found ways to make never-quite-enough work for us. Any unforeseen expense or decrease in benefit amount that I had not carefully budgeted for might have toppled our precarious existence.

With an imperishable hope that I would find a way out of poverty and make a better life for my kids, I applied for and received a scholarship to Nursing School. It was not long before I was gainfully employed as an RN.

It was TANF that kept my little family afloat. It was never a handout. It was always a hand up. It stabilized us long enough for me to earn my degree and enter the workforce for a decades-long career in the caring profession and a journey that led me into public service, to a seat alongside all of you in the state legislature, to this moment before this committee.

Why do I share my personal story today? Because when we consider a change in policy such as that before us in LD 78, it's important for us to consider precisely who the change may impact and how. That we understand that access to economic security programs has a dramatic effect on whether families in poverty can lift themselves out to successfully participate in the workforce. LD 78 strikes a balance between responding to individuals who do not comply with the TANF/ASPIRE program requirements without jeopardizing the health and well-being of the children and compliant adults who, under current policy, are punished through no fault of their own.

I urge you to consider the vulnerable families you undoubtedly represent and vote ought to pass on LD 78. Thank you.