



## **Statement by Feminists for Life of America**

Submitted to the House Committee on Ways and Means to be included in the record of the  
Subcommittee on Human Resources  
September 8, 2011 Hearing on  
**“Improving Work and Other Welfare Reform Goals”**

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As advocates for women and children, we know that Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is a vital resource for women and families living in poverty. Ninety percent of adult welfare clients are mothers, and children outnumber adults 2 to 1 on welfare rolls. Census Bureau reports this year tell us that 9.2 million families were living in poverty in 2010, with 1 in 5 children under 18 living in poverty. We also know that 69% of women who have abortions cite lack of financial resources in their decision to abort. As the committee considers how to address the needs of the poor and working poor, we ask the Chair and members to remember the woman.

The support women and their children receive through TANF is valuable not only to the recipients, but also to those who serve them. Pregnancy resource centers and local social service agencies depend upon services and opportunities TANF provides in order to direct their pregnant and parenting clients to needed resources. In fact, in its report *A Passion to Serve, A Vision for Life*, the Family Research Council lists a large number of TANF's resources in its directory of "community networks and public health linkages."

Feminists for Life includes TANF as a source of help in literature for pregnant women and parents—our "You Have Better Choices" brochure and "Raising Kids on a Shoestring," a national resource directory for pregnant women and parents.

Recent Guttmacher Institute reports indicate that 61% of women who have abortions already have at least one child. This fact coupled with the knowledge that two-thirds of women abort because of economic pressures tells us that in many instances, women feel driven to make a modern-day "Sophie's Choice"—choosing between the best interests of their born and unborn children. We empathize with these women and ask the committee to consider these untenable situations during their deliberations.

We already know the perils of failed policy when it comes to TANF. Since TANF's inception, Feminists for Life has worked to educate legislators about the punitive effects of the family cap and similar measures. In numerous studies, the family cap has proven to be ineffective in reducing the number of pregnancies (planned or unplanned). In 2001, Congressman Chris Smith of New Jersey cited a GAO report on the family cap's effect on out-of-wedlock births. The Congressman stated the "GAO report confirms what I and many others have been saying: that cutting support for women receiving TANF benefits if they have another child would only lead to increased poverty and possibly more abortions, not fewer pregnancies."

According to two different studies, the family cap has been linked to a rise in abortion rates. A study conducted at Rutgers University reported that when the family cap was instituted in New Jersey, the first state to implement the child exclusion policy, the result was an increased 1,429 abortions among welfare recipients. A second study looking into the family cap in Arkansas found a similar correlation between the family cap and abortion rates. In 2006, researcher Rebekah Smith wrote in the *Harvard Journal of Law and Gender*, "when faced with

the birth of a child for whom no assistance will be available for basic necessities, a woman may choose abortion as the state-sanctioned remedy.”

In addition to our efforts against the family cap, Feminists for Life has worked to make education more accessible to pregnant women and parents—including those among the poor and working poor. The latest Census poverty data shows that 26.3% of those without a high school diploma are poor compared to 10.9% of those with at least “some college.” Affordable and family-friendly education is the key to reducing the feminization of poverty. A study called “Yesterday’s Non-traditional Student is Today’s Traditional Student” recently published by CLASP shows that 23% of undergraduates are student parents. Many of these parents rely on public supports like Pell grants or TANF when working their way through school. In considering how to reform TANF, we would ask the committee to include more opportunities for those who wish to build their livelihood through higher education—with particular attention to policies that allow for the pursuit of 4-year degrees.

Women in abusive situations also face great and increasing challenges under the current welfare system. While states can choose to provide for domestic abuse counseling and support, these programs are limited in scope and vary from county to county and city to city. In addition, federal policy allows states’ TANF programs to offer financial incentives for couples who decide to marry. These fiscal policies can encourage some women in desperate poverty to become legally committed to an abusive partner.

Additionally, one of the legal requirements of receiving TANF is that recipients must pursue child support enforcement. While FFL has long been an advocate of increased child support enforcement, we cannot ignore the complexity of some of the relationships involved and the possibility that violence is a factor. Because of this mandate in TANF, women may be forced into declaring the identity of the father (if they don’t know for sure, as in cases of rape) and the state would follow up with collecting child support. Often there are reasons—sometimes cases of abuse—that fathers are omitted from the birth certificates in the first place. Christina Schnetzer of the Ohio Empowerment Coalition shared her personal experience the welfare and domestic violence at a briefing on Capitol Hill in 2010. Schnetzer said,

After divorcing a violent man, I did once again face violence... I am sickened that, after years of trying to find adequate counseling, I found no real help. No real relief. Even ten years later, the family violence option that was enacted in Ohio lost funding before the remaining 15 counties were trained through Child and Family Services to even recognize domestic violence. My county was one of the fifteen. But a family counselor at a conference did tell me about a program that paid people to get married under TANF guidelines.

Schnetzer’s first marriage was an abusive one, but it offered financial security; and so, like so many women, she felt trapped in it. FFL asks the committee to keep women like Christina

Schnitzer in mind when considering how to shape child support enforcement or violence prevention policies in TANF.

TANF is a crucial support for families struggling to climb out of poverty. While reforms are necessary to ensure the best use of federal and state resources, we implore the committee to consider how its proposed changes will affect women's decisions and well-being. As always, Feminists for Life remains available to committee members that have questions or would like further comment.