

THE EDUCATION/TRAINING REQUIREMENT FOR TANF TEEN PARENTS

THE 1996 LAW

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program prohibits states from spending federal funds on assistance to an unmarried, custodial minor parent caring for a child 12 weeks of age or older, unless the minor parent has completed high school or its equivalent or participates in appropriate educational activities (standard school or approved alternatives, including training programs). A “minor” under TANF includes those under the age of 18 as well as 18-year-olds who participate full-time in school. The term “participation” in education/training is left to the states to define.

No similar federal requirement exists for married minor parents or teen parents who are not minors, but states may elect to impose such requirements as a condition of receiving benefits. States may also use their own funds, in accordance with federal regulations, to assist those ineligible for federal TANF assistance.

BACKGROUND

Unintended childbearing by teens poses significant costs for teen parents, their families, and society; almost 60 percent of teens with a school-age pregnancy drop out at some point between 8th and 12th grade, with more than a quarter of these teen mothers dropping out *before* they get pregnant.¹ Further, teen mothers are less likely than mothers who delay their childbearing to have a high school diploma or GED by age 30 (61 percent versus 91 percent),² and their children have poorer school performance.³ As a result, the ability for these young mothers and their families to achieve economic self-sufficiency is a considerable challenge. Historically under the welfare system, over three-quarters of these individuals began receiving cash assistance within five years of giving birth as a teen,⁴ and women who gave birth as teenagers made up almost half of the welfare caseload.⁵

KEY DEVELOPMENTS

What TANF education/training policies have states implemented? Because states define what it means to “participate” in education/training activities under the federal TANF law, states set the rules for minor parents. A 1999 national survey analysis of the requirement by the State Policy Documentation Project (SPDP) looked at how the education/training requirement has been implemented by states.⁶ The Project found the following:

- Participation—States measure the “participation” of TANF teen parents in education/training using several methods: attendance (48 states), grade point average (four states), and grade completion (three states), with some states using more than one measure. In addition, other TANF youth (i.e., youth who are not teen parents but are in families receiving TANF benefits) are also required in some states to participate in elementary school (29 states), middle school (29 states), or high school (38 states). In some states, failure by a TANF youth to participate might result in his or her family’s grant being cut.

- ❑ Bonuses—Only about eight states provide bonuses for teen parents that participate in education.⁷ These bonus policies vary in their dollar amounts, how many times or how often teens may receive bonuses, and what activities they need to complete in order to receive bonuses.
- ❑ Sanctions—Thirty-eight states reduce participating teen parents’ cash assistance for non-compliance with on-going school participation rules; 10 states enforce a full-family sanction, and 27 states increase the sanction for subsequent violations. Thirty-five states apply a sanction only until the recipient is in compliance, while about 15 states require at least a one-month minimum time period before reinstatement.
- ❑ Alternative Placements—Sixteen states have criteria for alternative education placements, with the decision to provide such services often left to local discretion and on a case-by-case basis. Examples of approved alternative placements include youth employment training (15 states), including vocational education and mentoring programs (five states). Twenty-one states indicated they provide “Other” activities, such as GED or adult basic education classes.
- ❑ Exemptions—State policies regarding exemptions from the education/training requirement for teen parents vary. Typical reasons for exemptions include: not having child care/transportation available (24 states), caring for a child under 12 weeks or three months of age (21 states), caring for a disabled child (16 states), and being employed full time (13 states).

How many teen mothers receive TANF assistance and might be affected by the education/training rule? For fiscal year 2001, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported that 122,265 (13 percent) of the total number of teen recipients of TANF were also parents.⁸ However, since the data do not distinguish between minor parents and older teens, it is not possible to say how many of these parents are affected by the education/training rule. Further, analysis by CLASP suggests that the federal number of TANF teen parents may be significantly lower than the actual number—due to minor teen parents who are “embedded” within other TANF families.⁹

Are teen parents not applying for TANF due to the education/training provision? It appears an unintended consequence of the education/training rule may be that some teens are not getting the opportunity to apply for benefits at local TANF offices. Findings from surveys conducted by the Center for Impact Research (CIR) indicate that some minor mothers are not being allowed to apply for TANF.¹⁰ About 1,500 teen parents were interviewed in several neighborhoods of Atlanta, Boston, and Chicago. Using teen mothers as trained interviewers, this study found that, depending on the site, between 16 percent and 47 percent of the teen parents who sought TANF were told they were not eligible and they did not even fill out an application. While more research is needed to fully understand this phenomenon of teen parents being “turned away at the door,” it results to some extent from local caseworker misapprehension that a teen parent must already meet the teen parent requirements when she comes to apply.

Are teen parents being denied TANF or having their cases closed due to the education/training provision? Federal rules do not require states to report on the number of minors who seek TANF but are denied applications or aid,¹¹ so definitive data are not available on how many teen parents are determined ineligible for TANF assistance *at application* due to their failure to participate in education/training. Federal rules now require states to report the number of TANF families that have their cases *closed* because a teen parent failed to meet her school attendance requirement.¹²

However, the number of cases closed because of the teen parent rule was combined with other reasons for case closures, so it is not possible to know how many of the 53,700 cases reported closed in 2001 were because of the teen parent rule.¹³

How does the federal work participation rate relate to teen parents and education? TANF requires states to meet a work participation rate, where a certain proportion of the caseload must be participating in activities related to work, such as job search, basic education, or employment. If states fail to meet the rate, they are penalized and only certain activities count toward the rate. Teen parents under age 20 who are single heads-of-household meet the state work participation rate if they maintain satisfactory school attendance or are participating in education directly related to employment for at least 20 hours per week. With respect to vocational education, there is an overall cap of 30 percent of the overall TANF caseload who can participate in vocational education and still be counted in a state's work participation rate. This means that while a state can allow more than 30 percent of its caseload to participate in vocational education, it does not get any "credit" when it does so. This is a disincentive to allow teen parents to engage in vocational education, and it puts everyone who needs to receive such training in competition for limited spaces—both teens and adults.

How does the federal time limit on assistance apply to teen parents and education? The 1996 law generally prohibits federal TANF assistance to families in which an *adult* has received assistance for 60 months; states have the option to shorten this time limit. *Adults* include all 19-year-old teen parents and any 18-year-old teen parents who are not full-time students in a secondary school or equivalent training program. In addition, the time clock ticks for minor parents who are heads-of-household or those who are married to heads-of-household; states define who is a head of household.¹⁴

RESEARCH

Evaluations of demonstration programs provide insights into the challenge of school completion by teen parents. Results from education/training programs that were begun before TANF was passed in 1996 vary significantly, as do their approaches. The Learnfare Program in Wisconsin failed to demonstrate that its rule resulted in improved school attendance. Ohio's Learning, Earning, and Parenting (LEAP) Program generally improved enrollment and attendance. LEAP increased the likelihood that in-school participants would earn a GED or high school diploma; however, it did not show these effects for those who had dropped out of school. In-school participants also saw improved employment throughout a four-year follow-up period; while they also saw positive effects on their earnings, the control group caught up at the two-year mark. Under California's program, CalLearn, in contrast to the Ohio program, the positive impact of the program on graduation rates was greatest among those teen parents who had dropped out of school (and had not been held back a grade). Even though participants graduated at a significantly higher rate than non-participants in California, about half of the participants failed to graduate. Neither LEAP nor CalLearn found impacts on subsequent childbearing.¹⁵

Research is also emerging that analyzes teen parents and sanction rates. Some states implement sanctions for non-compliance with the education/training requirement by reducing a family's grant by the amount attributable to the non-compliant minor parent, while other states eliminate the family's grant completely. However, research suggests that, under TANF, teen parents may be disproportionately sanctioned. A CLASP survey found that nearly 2,500 teen parents in five responding states were sanctioned in *one month* for failure to comply with the education/training requirement.¹⁶ The rate of sanction for teen parents was higher in these five states when compared with the overall caseload. This higher rate of sanction for younger parents is of

concern because research has shown that fluctuations in income, such as those resulting from sanctions, can create turbulence for the family, which may lead to negative academic, emotional and behavioral effects on children.¹⁷

UPDATE ON TANF REAUTHORIZATION

The TANF law was not reauthorized when it expired at the end of September 2002 and instead operates under a continuing resolution. In 2002, the House passed a reauthorization measure, but in the Senate a bill never reached the floor. A TANF reauthorization bill, H.R. 4, introduced by Rep. Pryce (R-OH), was passed by the House in early 2003. The bill does not make changes related to the minor parent eligibility provisions. It is anticipated that the Senate Finance Committee will debate a measure in June or July of 2003, but that timeframe is not certain.

CLASP RECOMMENDATIONS

- Congress should implement a “transitional compliance” period for those teen parents who at application do not meet program requirements. This period is intended to provide for additional time and supportive services, such as case management, in order to bring teen parents into compliance.
- Congress should not start the federal assistance time-limit clock on teen parents when they are engaged in education/training. In order for these young mothers to be able to compete in the job market, they need to be able to participate in education without their schooling viewed as a “trade off” against their families’ ability to receive assistance if needed in the future.
- Congress should require that states undertake education-related needs assessments of teen parents and develop appropriate individualized service plans. Under TANF, an assessment of skills, work experience, and employability is required for older TANF recipients.¹⁸ For teen parents, an effective assessment of “school readiness,” including learning disabilities or mental health problems, is particularly important. Such information may be available through other agencies, but it needs to be part of the welfare case plan. The assessment should identify related support needs.
- Congress should examine teen parent sanction rates, the reasons that teen parents are sanctioned, and the impact of sanctions on these families. Congress should also establish sanction protection procedures that help teen parents understand, avoid, and/or end sanctions.
- Congress should require that state plans identify the extent of unmet service needs of TANF teen parents.
- Congress should identify mechanisms for rewarding states that create new, alternative placements and improve teen parent school graduation rates, particularly in light of the limited amount of evaluation data currently available.
- Congress should fund evaluations of promising approaches to addressing the education/training needs of teen parents.

For more information on the education/training requirement, see the CLASP survey of states, *Add It Up: Teen Parents and Welfare... Undercounted, Oversanctioned, Underserved*, at <http://www.clasp.org/DMS/Documents/1023136975.87/AddItUpReportFINAL.pdf>

For more information on the status of various TANF bills, go to this Library of Congress website: <http://thomas.loc.gov/home/thomas2.html>

ENDNOTES

¹ Manlove, J. (1998). The influence of high school dropout and school disengagement on the risk of school-age pregnancy. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 8(2), 187-220.

² Hotz, V.J., McElroy, S.W., & Sanders, S.G. (1997). The impacts of teenage childbearing on the mothers and the consequences of those impacts for government. In R. Maynard (Ed), *Kids Having Kids: Economic Costs and Social Consequences of Teen Pregnancy*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

³ Wertheimer, R., & Moore, K. (1998). *Childbearing by Teens: Links to Welfare Reform*. New Federalism Series, Number A-24, Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

⁴ Congressional Budget Office. (1990). *Sources of Support for Adolescent Mothers*. Washington, DC: Author

⁵ General Accounting Office. (May 31, 1994). *AFDC Women Who Gave Birth as Teenagers*. Washington, DC: General Accounting Office, GAO/HEHS-94-115.

⁶ For more information on the education/training requirement, see SPDP, *Education/Training Requirements*, March 1999, <http://www.spdp.org/school/>. SPDP also looked at states' Medicaid, TANF, and childcare policies. Note that some of these policies may have changed since the Project's data collection.

⁷ Under the Family Support Act, a majority of states used federal waivers to establish stay-in-school programs for teen parents, often called "Learnfare." Some programs used a bonus system, and some of these programs have continued to operate under TANF.

⁸ Administration for Children and Families. (2003, February). *Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Program: Fifth Annual Report to Congress*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. In fiscal year 1999, in the prior annual report, 108,000 teen parents were reported. However, data reporting and estimation problems were evident, such as uncounted teen parents who were "embedded" in other recipient households; significant numbers of recipients with an "unknown" status, some of which were likely teen parents; and federal estimation (sampling) methods that may have undercounted the number of teen parent recipients.

⁹ Duffy, J., & Levin-Epstein, J. (2002, April). *Add It Up: Teen Parents and Welfare... Undercounted, Oversanctioned and Underserved*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy.

¹⁰ Mathews, M., & Shelley, S. (1999, July-August). Turned Away, Misinformed, Denied - Teen Parents' Experiences in Welfare Offices, *Youth Law News*. Also see Shapiro, D.L., & Marcy, H.M. (April, 2002). *Knocking on the Door: Barriers to Welfare and Other Assistance for Teen Parents. A Three-City Research Study*. Chicago: Center for Impact Research. Available at <http://www.impactresearch.org/documents/CIRknockdoor.pdf>.

¹¹ Previously, the Emergency TANF Data Reporting Regulations did not require states to indicate such detailed reasons for case closure. Under the TANF Final Rules and Regulations, states are required to report the total number of applications, the total number of approved applications, and the total number of denied applications. However, the states are not required to report the reasons why applications are denied, so there is no federally required measure of how many teen parent are denied applications for failure to meet the living arrangement requirement. In the CLASP survey that analyzed March 1999 data, only two states could at that point report on how many teen parent cases were closed due to the rule: Arizona (19 percent) and Illinois (0.2 percent).

¹² While "teen parent failing to meet school attendance requirement" and "teen parent failing to live in an adult setting" are both reasons for case closure, if both are occurring, the closure reason recorded will only be coded under the former.

¹³ Administration for Children and Families. (2003, February). *Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Program: Fifth Annual Report to Congress*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

¹⁴ Levin-Epstein, J. *The 1996 Teen Parent Provisions*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy.

¹⁵ Bos, J.M., & Fellerath, V. (1997). *LEAP: Final Report on Ohio's Welfare Initiative to Improve School Attendance Among Teenage Parents*. Washington, DC: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation; Mauldon, J., Malvin, J., Stiles, J., Nicosia, N., & Seto, E (June 2000). *Impact of California's Cal-Learn Demonstration Project: Final Report*. California: University of California.

¹⁶ See Duffy, 2002. 2,485 teen parents in the five responding states were found to have been sanctioned. An earlier study by Mathematica on teen parents and TANF examined *annual* sanction rates and found rates ranging from 11 percent of teen parents in Virginia to 48 percent in the two study counties in California. See Wood, R.G., & Burghardt, J. (October 1997). *Implementing Welfare Reform Requirements for Teenage Parents: Lessons from Experience in Four States, Vols. 1 and 2*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc..

¹⁷ Anderson Moore, K., Vandivere, S., & Ehrle, J. (June 2000). *Turbulence and Child Well-Being*, Assessing the New Federalism, Series B, No. B-16.

¹⁸ P.L. 104-193, Title I, Section 408(b)(1).