

GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
OFFICE

AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION

Governmental Affairs Office

740 Fifteenth Street, NW
Washington, DC 20005-1022
(202) 662-1760
FAX: (202) 662-1762

DIRECTOR

Robert D. Evans
(202) 662-1765
rdevans@staff.abanet.org

SENIOR LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL

Denise A. Cardman
(202) 662-1761
cardmand@staff.abanet.org

Kevin J. Driscoll
(202) 662-1766
driscollk@staff.abanet.org

Lillian B. Gaskin
(202) 662-1768
gaskinl@staff.abanet.org

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL

R. Larson Frisby
(202) 662-1098
frisbyr@staff.abanet.org

Kristi Gaines
(202) 662-1763
gainesk@staff.abanet.org

Kenneth J. Goldsmith
(202) 662-1789
goldsmithk@staff.abanet.org

Ellen McBarnette
(202) 662-1767
mcbarnetee@staff.abanet.org

E. Bruce Nicholson
(202) 662-1769
nicholsonb@staff.abanet.org

DIRECTOR GRASSROOTS
OPERATIONS/LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL

Julie M. Strandlie
(202) 662-1764
strandlj@staff.abanet.org

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY
LAW CONSULTANT

Hayden Gregory
(202) 662-1772
gregoryh@staff.abanet.org

STATE LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL

Rita C. Aguilar
(202) 662-1780
aguilarr@staff.abanet.org

EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT

Julie Pasatiempo
(202) 662-1776
jpasatiempo@staff.abanet.org

STAFF DIRECTOR FOR
INFORMATION SERVICES

Sharon Greene
(202) 662-1014
greenes@staff.abanet.org

EDITOR WASHINGTON LETTER

Rhonda J. McMillion
(202) 662-1017
mcmillionr@staff.abanet.org

February 25, 2005

The Honorable Charles E. Grassley
Chair
Committee on Finance
United States Senate
219 Dirksen Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-6200

The Honorable Max S. Baucus
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Finance
United States Senate
219 Dirksen Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-6200

Dear Chairman Grassley and Senator Baucus:

We understand that the Committee on Finance is likely to soon consider legislation to reauthorize the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program and related programs. I am writing on behalf of the American Bar Association to urge the Committee members to adopt key provisions to strengthen TANF's commitment to basic fairness and better assure the equal application of its provisions to all before reporting a bill to the full Senate. These provisions are set out below.

Assure Due Process of Law in the Application of TANF Sanctions: The ABA urges the Committee to include provisions in its proposed reauthorization legislation to require constitutional protections in the administration of welfare programs, particularly notice and an opportunity to be heard, before the imposition of financial sanctions against families for noncompliance with program requirements. Senator Russ Feingold, along with Senators Mary Landrieu and Edward Kennedy, introduced legislation in the Senate in the 108th Congress addressing these requirements, as S.770.

In enacting TANF, Congress removed certain protections provided under prior law. Under current law, a state may terminate all TANF assistance for failure to comply with work-related (or other) requirements; there is no requirement that there be any conciliation process prior to doing so; and (with one limited

exception) there is no requirement that the state provide for good cause exceptions. Specifically, the statute states that if an individual “refuses to engage in work,” the state must reduce or terminate the family’s assistance, “subject to such good cause and other exceptions as the State may establish.”¹

When imposing sanctions, there is no requirement that a state provide an opportunity to resolve the problem, offer assistance in addressing the difficulty, or offer an opportunity for the individual to have assistance reinstated by coming into compliance. There is also no requirement that a state provide an opportunity for a hearing when a sanction is imposed, although all states have elected to maintain an administrative hearing process. Current law only requires that a state’s TANF plan shall include “an explanation of how the State will provide opportunities for recipients who have been adversely affected to be heard in a State.” This requirement is insufficient to provide basic fairness.

Some states have made extensive use of sanctions in their TANF implementation efforts. Since the comprehensive overhaul of welfare in PRWORA, opportunities for termination or reduction of benefits are more numerous, as work requirements and eligibility conditions have increased. In particular, financial sanctions for noncompliance with program rules have increased dramatically. Studies show that the families that get sanctioned often face serious employment barriers. The heads of these sanctioned families are also more likely to have limited education and work experience and/or serious health or mental health problems; they are also more likely to have been victims of domestic violence. In addition, advocates and lawyers who represent persons subject to sanctions find that state bureaucrats often do not have up-to-date information, and frequently have incomplete or missing data about individual participation in a variety of required program activities.

Given the current absence of due process protections for sanctioned TANF recipients, the ABA urges the implementation of the following protections that are currently lacking:

- the provision of clear, understandable notices;
- the establishment of the principle that a sanction should not be imposed when there is good cause for noncompliance;
- the assurance that sanctions will not continue (or will not continue for an unreasonable period) after a sanctioned individual comes into compliance;
- the requirement that all states include a conciliation process, and offer assistance to overcome employment barriers and medical difficulties; and
- provision for follow-up efforts, after states impose sanctions, to attempt to contact the family and offer assistance to help the family enter into compliance.

¹ 42 U.S.C. §609(7)(e)(1). There is a limited exception: a state may not reduce or terminate assistance to a single parent with a child under age six if the parent is unable to meet work requirements because of the unavailability of child care. 42 U.S.C. §607(e)(2).

We urge the Committee to support these changes to strengthen the provisions governing administration of TANF sanctions as part of reauthorizing legislation to assure due process and equal application and enforcement of the law.

Legal Immigrants: In reauthorizing TANF, we support proposals put forth in the past two Congresses to restore or extend TANF protections to legal immigrants and remove the present 5-year ban on access that would be continued in the Bush proposal. Fully one in five indigent children in the United States comes from a family headed by an immigrant parent. The ABA House of Delegates approved a policy recommendation in August 1997 urging Congress and the President to restore to legal immigrants the same rights to TANF, Supplemental Security Income, food stamps and other federal- and state- funded services, benefits and assistance which were available to them prior to enactment of Title IV of PRWORA. Stated affirmatively, immigrant children should have equal access to basic assistance, food stamps, health care, foster care and social services, public education and public housing, regardless of the immigration status of the child or the child's parents. Legal immigrants pay taxes, are eligible to serve in the military, and their children often are citizens.

The Association opposes any provision that would require benefits providers to verify the citizenship or immigration status of individuals who seek their assistance. Verification may deter eligible applicants from applying and may result in eligibility determinations based on invidious factors such as an individual's name, accent, speech pattern or physical appearance. When it is required by law, federal, state and local agencies administering benefits programs subject to PRWORA should follow Department of Homeland Security and Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services guidelines limiting verification only to the status of the actual recipient of the benefits. Parents who are applying on behalf of "qualified" children should not be required to respond to questions concerning their own immigration status.

Family Formation: The ABA supports the consensus that is apparent among the principal sponsors of TANF reauthorization proposals to end the existing "illegitimacy bonus" to the states and to replace it with support for programs to strengthen family formation.

Child Support Enforcement: The ABA supports the provisions passed by the House in H.R.4 to increase the pass-through of child support from payments made to states to families receiving assistance.

Child Care: The ABA supports expanding availability of child care and bipartisan efforts to increase funding under Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) program. The CCDBG program should be funded at substantially higher levels in order to enable parents of young children to work. Child care assistance should be excluded from the five-year time limit for TANF assistance and states should be permitted to carry over unspent TANF funds from previous years for child care and for supporting attainment of minimum health and safety standards for CCDBG-funded child care. The ABA supports the provision introduced by Senator Olympia Snowe and adopted overwhelmingly by the Senate in the 108th Congress to provide additional child-care funding and urges the House to adopt similar provisions.

“Super-Waiver” Authority: The ABA has strong concerns about the breadth of the proposed new super-waiver provisions contained in reauthorizing legislation passed by the House in the 108th Congress, H.R.4, which would grant authority to the Executive Branch – the Secretary of HHS in conjunction with state officials – to waive a wide range of program rules legislated by Congress and to reorder spending priorities dramatically among those programs. We urge the Committee to continue existing law in this area.

Equitable Access for Native American Children to Federal Foster Care and Adoption Assistance Programs: The ABA supports amendment of Title IV–E of the Social Security Act to provide equitable access for foster care and adoption services for Indian children under tribal court jurisdiction. The current TANF reauthorization process provides an opportunity to correct this problem by allowing direct tribal administration of the Foster Care and Adoption Assistance Entitlement Program. The ABA believes tribal governments should be able to directly administer the program, and tribal governments should retain the option to enter into tribal-state agreements, in order to correct the preferential treatment of one class of children.

The purpose of the Title IV-E Foster Care and Adoption Assistance Act is to ensure that children receive adequate care when placed in foster care and adoption programs. The act provides for the reimbursement of states for services provided to income-eligible children who are placed in foster care or adoptive homes through state agencies. Services provided by tribes for income-eligible children placed by tribal agencies are not eligible for reimbursement unless there is a tribal-state agreement. As a result, thousands of Native American children who meet income eligibility criteria who are placed in foster care by tribal courts do not receive foster care and adoptive services to which all other income-eligible children are entitled, and have little federal support in achieving the permanency they need and deserve. This amendment to current law would require that federal programs provide equitable access to foster care and adoption services for Indian children under tribal court jurisdiction.

The ABA urges the Committee to use the opportunity provided by the reauthorization process to address these key provisions and thereby achieve a stronger TANF program.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Robert D. Evans".

Robert D. Evans

cc: Members of the Committee

