

Trends in Welfare Programs

By Sheila R. Zedlewski and Meghan Williamson

Congress reauthorized the nation's welfare bill along with the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005. The legislation substantially changes TANF's work participation requirements. States will need to meet a 50 percent participation rate for all families receiving assistance, including those in separate state-funded programs. The rate will be adjusted downward for any caseload decline occurring after 2005. The new participation requirement will present a challenge to many states. Current work participation rates generally fall substantially below the new requirement. Also, many states have depleted their TANF reserve funds, leaving them little flexibility to develop new strategies to increase work among caseload participants.

Recent Caseload Experience

Nationwide, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) caseloads declined by 5 percent between the end of fiscal year 2003 and March 2005, reaching their lowest level in more than 30 years (Table A). Recent modest caseload declines contrast with the dramatic drops that followed the 1996 passage of welfare reform. Caseloads were cut in half in response to new reforms and an unusually strong economy between 1996 and 2000.

The recent national trends also mask important differences across the states. Since the end of federal fiscal year 2003, caseloads increased in 18 states (Table A); and four states experienced increases of 10 percent or more (Colorado, Idaho, Kansas and Pennsylvania). On the other hand, caseloads in 12 states (Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana, Nevada, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia and Wyoming) declined by more than 20 percent.

Caseload trends during the recent economic cycle have stumped many scholars. Most would have predicted caseload increases during periods of higher unemployment and decreases after a recovery (caseloads have traditionally lagged behind unemployment rates). Instead we observe continued caseload decline throughout the business cycle, and many of the states with substantial caseload declines during 2004 and early 2005 had higher than average unemployment rates. For example, state unemployment during 2004 exceeded the national average in five of the 12 states with the steepest caseload decline and fell below the national average in seven of the states with caseload increases.¹

States' TANF programs also affect caseload trends. Some TANF programs discourage entry through diversion and work requirements, and sanctions and time limits cause some families to lose eli-

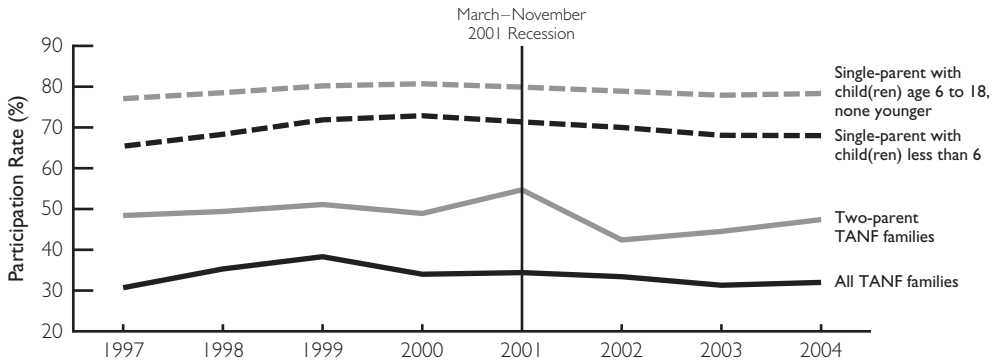
gibility. Research has shown that new program rules have reduced entry rates making TANF less sensitive to unemployment rate changes.² Also, more families have reached their five-year federal time limit and lost benefit eligibility.³

Another factor at play may be the use of other safety net programs to tide former and potential welfare recipients over when jobs are scarce. In contrast to welfare, food stamp caseloads increased by about 40 percent between 2000 and 2004.⁴ Recent research shows families are now more likely to receive these benefits after leaving welfare than they were during the early phase of welfare reform. Changes in states' administrative procedures that keep food stamp cases open after families leave welfare, new rules liberalizing the vehicle limits and recertification procedures, and more education about food stamp eligibility have increased food stamp enrollment among former welfare recipients.⁵

Caseload Work Participation

The closely watched performance measure for TANF—work participation rates—has continued to decline. Only 32 percent of the TANF caseload engaged in work in 2004 (the latest data available), compared with 38 percent in 1999. The reductions in caseload work participation reflect the general, slow decline in employment among single parents (Figure A). One study estimated that the recent economic downturn contributed to a decrease in the full-time employment rate among single-parent families of almost 13 percent between 2000 and 2003.⁶

Work participation rates in 2004 varied from less than 20 percent in the District of Columbia, Maryland, Missouri, Pennsylvania and West Virginia to more than 80 percent in Kansas and Montana (Table A). While the federal work participation target was

Figure A: Work Participation Rates, 1997–2004

Note: Participation rates among TANF families is reported for each federal fiscal year. Participation rates among all single-parent families is based on calendar year reporting.

Sources: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, "TANF Work Participation Rates" Fiscal Years 1997–2003, downloaded from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/particip/indexparticip.htm>, November 30, 2005.

U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employment Characteristics of Families" 1997–2004, downloaded from <http://www.bls.gov>, November 30, 2005.

50 percent in 2004, all states except Indiana and Mississippi met the target because of the caseload reduction credit.⁷ After accounting for the credit, states only had to meet an average work participation rate of 9 percent, and only five states (Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Nebraska and Nevada) had to meet a work participation rate greater than 25 percent. Overall, states achieved substantially more than required by the 2004 federal rules, but many will face new challenges with the change in the caseload reduction credit under TANF reauthorization.

Also, comparisons of work participation rates across the states can be somewhat misleading because the meaning of the rate varies by state. For example, some states exclude families with a child younger than 1-year-old from work activities and the work participation rate calculation. Also, four states still had waivers approved before 1996 that affected participation rate calculations for 2004. In other words, some states exclude recipients not subject to work requirements from their rate calculations; work participation rates shown in Table A would be lower if these recipients were included.

TANF Spending

Total TANF-related spending was more than \$28 billion in 2004 (Table B). Total spending fell below spending in 2003 (\$29 billion) as states had fewer reserve funds to spend. Seventeen states had spent all their reserves by the end of 2004, and many

more states had very few reserves left. Nonetheless, reserve fund spending accounted for almost 10 percent of total 2004 expenditures.

Most states continued to spend considerably less than half their total expenditures on basic assistance in 2004.⁸ Only a few states spent less than 15 percent of their resources on basic assistance (Idaho, Illinois and Wyoming), and six spent more than half on basic assistance (Arizona, California, Hawaii, Maine, Nebraska and New Hampshire). Child care remained a significant TANF expenditure for many states. Nationwide, states spent more than \$5 billion for child care in 2004 (18 percent of all TANF dollars). Eight states (Alaska, Delaware, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Oklahoma and Wisconsin) and the District of Columbia devoted at least 30 percent of their TANF dollars to this type of work support.

Limited funds for child care and diminished reserves raise concerns over states' abilities to meet new caseload needs. About half the states (24) had waiting lists or had frozen intake for child care subsidies in 2004.⁹ Also, state TANF innovations have slowed in recent years as spending flexibility has declined.¹⁰ As numerous studies have shown, many TANF recipients need intensive services before they can move into self-sustaining jobs. Nearly four in 10 recipients lack a high school diploma or GED and more than one-third have serious mental or physical challenges.¹¹ Under the new, tougher work partici-

Table A: Trends in TANF Caseload, 1996–2005

| State or other jurisdiction | TANF family caseload March 2005 (a) | Percent change from | | | Work participation rates FY 2004 (c) |
|-----------------------------|--|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| | | FY 1996 to 2000 (b) | FY 2000 to 2003 (b) | FY 2003 to March 2005 | |
| Alabama | 20,214 | -55.0% | -1.3% | 7.3% | 37.9% |
| Alaska | 4,814 | -40.0 | -27.4 | -9.7 | 43.6 |
| Arizona | 43,223 | -46.8 | 41.7 | -9.6 | 25.5 |
| Arkansas | 8,660 | -45.7 | -9.6 | -22.4 | 27.3 |
| California | 466,074 | -44.4 | -9.8 | 3.7 | 23.1 |
| Colorado | 15,903 | -68.5 | 21.3 | 17.5 | 34.7 |
| Connecticut | 19,608 | -51.7 | -25.2 | -6.7 | 24.3 |
| Delaware | 5,531 | -41.7 | -7.6 | -1.2 | 22.1 |
| Florida | 59,761 | -67.9 | -13.7 | 2.8 | 40.4 |
| Georgia | 41,155 | -59.4 | 5.7 | -26.4 | 24.8 |
| Hawaii | 8,169 | -34.3 | -32.3 | -16.4 | 70.5 |
| Idaho | 1,919 | -85.8 | 31.8 | 14.2 | 41.0 |
| Illinois | 38,887 | -62.6 | -54.8 | 2.6 | 46.1 |
| Indiana | 48,389 | -32.2 | 46.9 | -8.2 | 30.0 |
| Iowa | 17,738 | -38.9 | -0.3 | -11.2 | 50.0 |
| Kansas | 17,399 | -50.0 | 21.6 | 13.7 | 88.0 |
| Kentucky | 34,864 | -46.3 | -9.4 | -0.2 | 38.1 |
| Louisiana | 15,979 | -60.6 | -17.9 | -30.0 | 35.4 |
| Maine | 9,729 | -46.9 | -15.8 | 6.3 | 32.1 |
| Maryland | 23,091 | -60.4 | -10.8 | -11.6 | 16.0 |
| Massachusetts | 48,837 | -50.0 | 11.7 | -1.1 | 60.0 |
| Michigan | 81,329 | -58.3 | 1.2 | 8.3 | 24.5 |
| Minnesota | 29,301 | -33.0 | -6.5 | -19.7 | 26.8 |
| Mississippi | 15,763 | -68.8 | 32.4 | -20.5 | 21.0 |
| Missouri | 40,529 | -43.5 | -12.7 | -0.8 | 19.5 |
| Montana | 4,861 | -58.0 | 35.4 | -21.2 | 92.7 |
| Nebraska | 9,787 | -34.5 | 14.8 | -10.6 | 34.5 |
| Nevada | 6,794 | -57.7 | 69.5 | -36.1 | 34.5 |
| New Hampshire | 6,209 | -38.8 | 4.1 | 2.1 | 30.2 |
| New Jersey | 42,935 | -51.1 | -17.8 | 1.2 | 34.6 |
| New Mexico | 17,364 | -30.1 | -29.7 | 4.4 | 46.2 |
| New York | 141,446 | -40.1 | -42.5 | -4.9 | 37.8 |
| North Carolina | 33,201 | -59.6 | -11.6 | -17.9 | 31.4 |
| North Dakota | 2,832 | -40.7 | 16.4 | -16.1 | 25.3 |
| Ohio | 82,897 | -52.6 | -14.0 | -1.7 | 65.2 |
| Oklahoma | 11,630 | -63.1 | 5.1 | -22.7 | 33.2 |
| Oregon | 20,240 | -49.0 | 9.7 | 8.2 | 32.1 |
| Pennsylvania | 96,800 | -52.8 | -10.1 | 19.7 | 7.1 |
| Rhode Island | 10,763 | -23.1 | -18.2 | -19.4 | 23.7 |
| South Carolina | 15,506 | -61.8 | 23.3 | -28.2 | 53.7 |
| South Dakota | 2,744 | -53.3 | -0.4 | -1.7 | 54.8 |
| Tennessee | 70,379 | -43.3 | 22.3 | 2.5 | 50.6 |
| Texas | 85,092 | -49.8 | 4.2 | -36.1 | 34.2 |
| Utah | 9,164 | -43.1 | 1.5 | 7.3 | 26.2 |
| Vermont | 4,561 | -33.3 | -18.8 | -7.1 | 24.9 |
| Virginia | 9,869 | -50.9 | -20.8 | -60.9 | 50.1 |
| Washington | 58,311 | -42.4 | -4.1 | 6.6 | 35.4 |
| West Virginia | 11,963 | -66.8 | 30.3 | -24.4 | 11.7 |
| Wisconsin | 20,293 | -72.2 | 22.4 | -0.8 | 61.3 |
| Wyoming | 311 | -87.2 | -32.5 | -23.8 | 77.8 |
| Dist. of Columbia | 16,905 | -32.2 | -4.9 | 1.9 | 18.2 |
| United States | 1,909,273 | -50.3 | -9.9 | -5.0 | 32.0 |

Sources: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, "Caseload Data as of 8/20/2005," downloaded from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/caseload/caseloadindex.htm>, November 30, 2005.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, "TANF Work Participation Rates Fiscal Year 2004," downloaded from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/particip/indexparticip.htm>, February 18, 2006.

Key:

(a) Average monthly caseload for FY 2005 not available at time of publication. Most recent 2005 data included here.

(b) Percent changes are based on the average monthly caseloads during the two relevant fiscal years.

(c) Work participation rates for all families, including two-parent families.

Table B: TANF Spending: Combined Federal and State, FY 2004

| State or other jurisdiction | Total expenditures (federal and state) (a) | Percent basic assistance | Percent work-related activities | Percent child care (b) | Percent other | Federal funds in reserve (c) |
|-----------------------------|--|--------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|---------------|------------------------------|
| Alabama | \$ 144,752,676 | 31% | 12% | 11% | 47% | 16% |
| Alaska | 95,116,599 | 46 | 13 | 30 | 12 | 12 |
| Arizona | 327,668,058 | 56 | 5 | 3 | 36 | 0 |
| Arkansas | 60,397,456 | 28 | 8 | 29 | 35 | 142 |
| California | 6,545,424,399 | 50 | 6 | 17 | 27 | 0 |
| Colorado | 254,884,850 | 26 | 0 | 12 | 63 | 0 |
| Connecticut | 461,555,688 | 27 | 7 | 3 | 63 | 0 |
| Delaware | 60,005,267 | 34 | 0 | 41 | 25 | 7 |
| Florida | 1,061,889,475 | 23 | 8 | 33 | 36 | 0 |
| Georgia | 548,493,594 | 30 | 20 | 6 | 44 | 29 |
| Hawaii | 145,179,669 | 60 | 7 | 14 | 18 | 78 |
| Idaho | 51,802,551 | 14 | 15 | 15 | 56 | 0 |
| Illinois | 1,015,145,153 | 11 | 10 | 37 | 42 | 0 |
| Indiana | 320,039,932 | 38 | 3 | 6 | 53 | 0 |
| Iowa | 202,679,788 | 39 | 10 | 17 | 34 | 10 |
| Kansas | 181,855,401 | 34 | 1 | 16 | 50 | 3 |
| Kentucky | 242,753,836 | 44 | 11 | 28 | 17 | 26 |
| Louisiana | 290,486,358 | 22 | 8 | 10 | 60 | 0 |
| Maine | 136,068,400 | 56 | 1 | 23 | 20 | 20 |
| Maryland | 391,762,105 | 28 | 12 | 11 | 49 | 17 |
| Massachusetts | 819,025,332 | 42 | 1 | 33 | 24 | 1 |
| Michigan | 1,308,006,810 | 31 | 4 | 26 | 40 | 9 |
| Minnesota | 431,587,903 | 39 | 13 | 22 | 26 | 16 |
| Mississippi | 115,399,285 | 28 | 6 | 20 | 46 | 2 |
| Missouri | 347,055,127 | 40 | 8 | 23 | 30 | 0 |
| Montana | 47,886,492 | 44 | 21 | 6 | 29 | 43 |
| Nebraska | 97,944,672 | 66 | 13 | 16 | 6 | 0 |
| Nevada | 69,101,107 | 47 | 3 | 4 | 46 | 22 |
| New Hampshire | 60,200,822 | 57 | 9 | 8 | 26 | 79 |
| New Jersey | 941,074,851 | 28 | 7 | 8 | 57 | 10 |
| New Mexico | 167,638,466 | 44 | 7 | 22 | 28 | 8 |
| New York | 4,725,899,100 | 34 | 5 | 11 | 51 | 5 |
| North Carolina | 528,022,699 | 23 | 12 | 35 | 31 | 0 |
| North Dakota | 34,473,275 | 36 | 8 | 5 | 51 | 36 |
| Ohio | 909,563,534 | 35 | 7 | 19 | 39 | 37 |
| Oklahoma | 238,875,407 | 18 | 0 | 42 | 40 | 8 |
| Oregon | 242,993,015 | 35 | 12 | 10 | 44 | 0 |
| Pennsylvania | 1,357,854,175 | 28 | 13 | 20 | 38 | 11 |
| Rhode Island | 168,684,072 | 47 | 5 | 27 | 22 | 0 |
| South Carolina | 38,174,709 | 47 | (d) | 10 | (d) | 4 |
| South Dakota | 31,183,844 | 36 | 10 | 3 | 51 | 71 |
| Tennessee | 290,295,689 | 41 | 10 | 25 | 24 | 6 |
| Texas | 767,925,783 | 28 | 10 | 3 | 60 | 0 |
| Utah | 115,227,837 | 40 | 27 | 8 | 25 | 15 |
| Vermont | 82,483,186 | 43 | 1 | 20 | 36 | 0 |
| Virginia | 311,177,014 | 36 | 27 | 13 | 25 | 0 |
| Washington | 694,778,008 | 46 | 15 | 24 | 15 | 1 |
| West Virginia | 157,270,102 | 44 | 4 | 14 | 38 | 2 |
| Wisconsin | 571,353,691 | 24 | 6 | 44 | 27 | 4 |
| Wyoming | 41,684,882 | 13 | 1 | 4 | 82 | 99 |
| Dist. of Columbia | 191,061,848 | 37 | 12 | 32 | 19 | 25 |
| United States | 28,441,863,992 | 37 | 8 | 18 | 38 | 7 |

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, "Fiscal Year 2004 TANF Financial Data," downloaded from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofs/data/tanf_2004.html, November 30, 2005.

Key:

(a) Includes transfers to the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) and the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG).

(b) Includes the CCDF transfer.

(c) Listed as a percentage of fiscal year 2004 expenditures. Excludes transfers to the CCDF and the SSBG and unliquidated obligations in the reserve.

(d) In 2004, South Carolina reported a negative expenditure on work-related activities in order to correct over-reporting of work-related expenditures in prior fiscal years.

pation requirements, many states will need to spend more for child care and support services in order to increase work participation among their caseloads.

Finally, the recent hurricane disasters show how unexpected demands can affect states' TANF programs. Some parents who lost their jobs as a result of the disaster have turned to state welfare programs for help. The Emergency Response and Relief Act provides additional TANF funding of up to 20 percent of basic block grants in the form of loans to three states affected by Hurricane Katrina (Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi). Additionally, all states can apply for federal reimbursement for short-term, nonrecurrent cash benefits paid to affected families. States can apply for up to 20 percent of the monthly value of their basic TANF grant each month, until the \$1.9 billion TANF contingency fund is exhausted.¹² The three states hit by Katrina, already fiscally strained states with essentially no TANF reserves, will potentially have TANF loans to repay among their recovery debts.

Reauthorization

The TANF reauthorization passed in the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 represents a major breakthrough. The original legislation ended in federal fiscal year 2001, and states have been operating their TANF programs through continuing resolutions since then. The legislation also represents a significant compromise compared with earlier House and Senate Finance Committee reauthorization proposals. Under the new legislation, the work participation rate will remain fixed at 50 percent; original House and Senate Finance proposals would have increased the work participation rates to 70 percent by 2010.¹³ The new legislation retains the existing 30 hour per week work requirement and existing categories of work participation (although the federal government must issue regulations no later than June 30, 2006 to define those work activities, uniform methods for reporting hours of work, the type of documentation required to verify reported hours of work, and who must be included in the work participation rates). The original House and Senate Finance proposals, in contrast, would have increased the required hours of work activity to 40 and 34, respectively, and the House proposal would have mandated more paid work activity.¹⁴

Despite the continued 30 hours workweek and 50 percent participation standard, states will face much stricter participation standards under reauthorization. Beginning in October 2006, the caseload reduction credit will only reflect decreases in the caseload since fiscal year 2005, raising the effective participation rate far above the current average of 9 percent.

Additionally, the participation standards will apply to state-only programs that were previously exempt from the federal standard. This will primarily affect the 26 states currently covering two-parent families with state-only funds. States are subject to a much higher participation standard (90 percent) for two-parent families. Many states will face an especially tough challenge in meeting the work participation rate requirement for two-parent families under the new rules. States that do not meet the participation rate targets can face penalties up to 5 percent of their federal block grants and higher maintenance of effort requirements.

The final bill includes \$200 million more per year in additional state matching funds for child care. This amount falls far short of the Senate Finance Committee's request for \$1.2 billion per year, but is double the House's request for \$100 million per year in additional child care funds. It remains to be seen whether states will have sufficient funds to subsidize child care for the greater share of TANF recipients they must move into work activities without reducing child care subsidies for non-welfare low-income families.

Congress did not include the controversial "super-waivers" in the final bill. Previous attempts to reauthorize TANF would have allowed states to apply for waivers to redirect federal dollars from a variety of programs (including child care, TANF, and social services) to low-income families. The House and Senate Finance proposals, however, differed in how inclusive the proposed waivers would be.

The final bill does include grants for states to develop Healthy Marriage and responsible fatherhood initiatives. It also reduces federal funding for child support collections, allows states to increase the amount of child support that can be passed through to current and former welfare recipients, and mandates that states adjust child support orders of families on TANF every three years.

Conclusion

States' TANF caseloads continued to decline in 2004 relative to the prior year, although caseload trends varied considerably across the states. Work participation among TANF recipients also continued to decline, generally following employment trends for all single parents. States' TANF expenditures declined relative to 2003, as reserve funds continued to shrink.

Congress reauthorized TANF through the 2005 Deficit Reduction Act. Work participation rates will be higher, and more recipients must be included in these calculators. Many states will need to change their TANF programs to meet the new participation

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rates. Some states will need to shift more of their TANF spending toward work-related activities and child care for recipients.

The new legislation continues to freeze states' basic block grants at levels established in 1996. The recent Katrina disaster highlighted the constraints of this fixed block grant welfare program. When families' needs for cash assistance increase abruptly, states must depend on the federal government to pass emergency legislation to cover new state costs. While the federal government authorized contingency fund spending, it will cover some Katrina-related costs through loans to the most affected states. Loan payments in turn represent an obligation that could reduce future TANF resources available in affected states.¹⁵ Katrina demonstrates that states must plan for unexpected increases in families' needs.

Notes

¹Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, "Over-the-Year Change in Unemployment Rates for States," downloaded from www.bls.gov, November 30, 2005.

²Greg Acs, Katherin Ross Phillips, and Sandi Nelson, "The Road Not Taken: Changes in Welfare Entry During the 1990s," (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, December 2003).

³Unfortunately, national statistics on the number of families ineligible for assistance due to time limits are not available.

⁴Food and Nutrition Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Program Data: Annual State Level Data," downloaded from <http://www.fns.usda.gov/pdf/fspmain.htm>, December 2, 2005.

⁵See Sheila Zedlewski and Kelly Rader, "Have Food Stamp Program Changes Increased Participation?" (*Social Service Review*, 537–61, September 2005).

⁶Greg Acs, Harry Holzer, and Austin Nichols, "How Have Households with Children Fared in the Job Market Downturn?" (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, April 2005).

⁷The current caseload reduction credit allows states to reduce participation rates by one percentage point for each percentage point decline in the caseload since fiscal year 1995 that is not attributable to changes in eligibility policy.

⁸Note that these shares for basic assistance, child care, and work-related activities include funds spent for these types of assistance under state-only programs.

⁹David Edie, "Toward a New Child Care Policy," University of Wisconsin–Child Care Research Partnership, prepared for the Urban Institute "New Steps in the Working Families Agenda," (May 2005).

¹⁰Jack Tweedie, "Dollars Make a Difference," in *State Legislatures*, (February 2005).

¹¹Sheila Zedlewski, "Work and Barriers to Work among Welfare Recipients in 2002," *Assessing the New Federalism Snapshots3 of America's Families*, Number 3, (August 2003).

¹²Mark Greenberg, "New TANF Law Provides Additional Funds for Katrina Relief: Key Improvements Still

Needed," (Washington, D.C.: Center for Law and Social Policy, September 2005).

¹³The discussion reflects the bills passed by Senate Finance Committee in March 2005 and the welfare reauthorization rules passed by the House as part of its budget reconciliation bill in November 2005.

¹⁴Gene Falk, Melinda Gish, Carmen Solomon-Fears, and Emilie Stoltzfus, "Welfare Reauthorization: A Side-By-Side Comparison of Current Law, Senate Committee-Approved and House Budget Reconciliation Bill Provisions," (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, RL33157, November 2005).

¹⁵HHS has issued guidance, however, indicating that states will not be penalized for failing to pay interest or repay the loan through October 2007.

About the Authors

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