



May 19, 2023

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

The Honorable Kamala D. Harris
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Biden and Vice President Harris:

I am writing from First Focus Campaign for Children, a bipartisan children's advocacy organization dedicated to prioritizing children in federal budget and policy decisions, to urge you to please protect the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program in debt ceiling talks.

Since the expiration of the 2021 improvements to the Child Tax Credit (CTC), the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program has been the only federal program providing monthly cash assistance to families with very low incomes. TANF is a children's program — [more than 70% of TANF recipients are children](#). TANF provides critical assistance to millions of children and families, through cash assistance as well as funding for child care, state tax credits, food banks and other aid.

Extensive research shows that tax credits and cash transfers influence positive parent-child interactions, improve child development outcomes, and have a bigger impact than any other policy in reducing child poverty. A 2019 landmark study from the nonpartisan National Academy of Sciences, *A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty*, found that cash assistance improves children's long-term health and educational and economic outcomes both by increasing access to resources that support children's healthy development and by reducing household stress, giving parents and caregivers more mental and emotional bandwidth for their children. For families in crisis, timely cash assistance can provide the support that parents need to reunify with their children — or keep them from entering the child welfare system to begin with.

While TANF cash assistance is a lifeline for those households with children that receive it — helping parents and caretakers afford food, rent, diapers and other staples — it fails to reach many kids in need. [In 2020, for every 100 families in poverty, just 21 received TANF assistance](#). TANF's rules allow state officials to set narrow parameters for program eligibility and impose strict work requirements and arduous administrative burdens on program participation. State officials can spend TANF dollars on a wide variety of items outside of cash assistance or work supports, and many do. As a fixed block grant, TANF funding does not automatically increase to meet greater need during times of economic crisis. Finally, because it is not indexed to inflation, TANF's value has decreased over time and the program has not received an increase in federal

funding since its creation in 1996. As a result of these restrictions, very few low-income families with children receive TANF cash assistance, and those that do often receive very low levels of assistance.

It is therefore critical for lawmakers to protect and [improve the TANF program](#) to reach more families with children in need. Yet H.R. 2811 would likely further limit the number of children in families that receive TANF assistance by [significantly limiting states' flexibility in implementing work requirements and delivering cash assistance and employment services](#). The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities finds that almost 1 million children could be at risk of losing TANF assistance if Congress enacts these provisions.

[Numerous studies have shown](#) that rather than fostering economic mobility, work requirements prevent parents and caretakers from accessing assistance, piling burdens on struggling families and increasing disparities for those in marginalized communities. A *Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty* also found that “work requirements are at least as likely to increase as to decrease poverty.” The [racist roots of work requirements](#) for benefit programs extend far back into our nation’s history, starting with the slave trade and continuing today, as racist stereotypes persist about Black and other people of color’s willingness to work. Documenting work is especially onerous for low-wage workers, disproportionately workers of color, who often have no control over their schedules and whose hours may vary from week to week.

Work requirements also do not account for uncompensated childrearing and caretaking of family members, work that produces large benefits to the collective whole. Grandparents caring for grandchildren, or parents caring for children with disabilities or special health care needs face particular barriers to economic security.

Protect TANF, along with Medicaid, SNAP, and Other Spending on Children

The U.S. House of Representatives’ recent passage of H.R. 2811 uses the full faith and credit of the United States as a bargaining chip for extremely harmful changes to TANF, along with Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). To add insult to injury, the bill includes deep spending cuts to non-defense discretionary spending. The United States already underinvests in our children — [as First Focus on Children’s annual Children’s Budget shows](#), children do not receive their fair share of government funds. Lawmakers must protect funding for children’s programs along with those programs that benefit low-income seniors and adults.

We are grateful for your commitment to refuse any debt ceiling deal that would push Americans into poverty. We ask that you stand by this commitment by rejecting provisions in H.R. 2811 that would increase child poverty by weakening children’s access to cash assistance,

health care and nutrition assistance in TANF, Medicaid, and SNAP. We also ask you to reject across-the-board cuts to discretionary spending programs that serve children. These proposed crushing spending cuts and policy changes would cause severe harm to the health, safety, and well-being of our children, families, and people in need around the country, and would ask our most vulnerable populations to shoulder the nation's debt.

Thank you for your leadership on behalf of children and families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bruce Lesley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent loop on the "L" and a long tail on the "y".

Bruce Lesley
President