

Comprehensive Policy/Advocacy Action Plan

SOCW 609 – Advanced Policy

**Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Reform in Tennessee:
Reintroduction of HB 0137/SB 0144 with Amendment to Establish Direct Access
Teams**

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Policy Issue and Context

Poverty remains a persistent social problem in Tennessee and continues to impact children and families through food insecurity, housing instability, and limited access to education and health supports. Tennessee's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program (Families First) is intended to provide temporary cash assistance and related supports to qualifying families, while promoting self-sufficiency through workforce development and employment activities.

Despite TANF's intended purpose, Tennessee has faced ongoing public scrutiny for maintaining a large balance of unspent TANF funds while relatively few families receive cash assistance. Reports indicate the state has accumulated a substantial TANF surplus while participation in cash assistance remains low, raising concerns about administrative barriers, limited outreach, and insufficient accountability for how funds are allocated.

Relevant Policy

This advocacy plan focuses on Tennessee House Bill (HB) 0137 and Senate Bill (SB) 0144 (introduced in 2021), a proposal that would require the Tennessee Department of Human Services (TDHS) to: (a) establish a TANF reserve fund; (b) distribute unspent TANF funds to counties based on the number of children living at or below the federal poverty level; (c) create a Tennessee Opportunity Pilot Program; (d) establish an advisory board; and (e) provide annual reporting regarding TANF spending and outcomes.

Policy Goals and Proposed Amendment

The primary goal of HB 0137/SB 0144 is to strengthen oversight, transparency, and utilization of TANF funds so that eligible families can access support more effectively. This plan advocates for reintroducing HB 0137/SB 0144 as originally written, with a targeted amendment to the section on proportional county allotments.

Proposed Amendment: Establish Direct Access Teams (DATs) to serve as liaisons between TDHS and local county providers (nonprofits and local agencies) that deliver TANF-supported, evidence-based services. DATs would support implementation fidelity by reviewing provider proposals for eligibility, monitoring the use of funds, assisting counties in maintaining a sufficient number of qualified providers, and producing county-level annual summaries of TANF spending and activities.

Current Status of the Policy Area

HB 0137/SB 0144 has remained stalled in the legislative process. As of 2023, there has been no new sponsor, no active movement toward reintroduction, and no subsequent amendments formally advanced. This advocacy plan therefore focuses on

reintroducing the bill and advancing the DAT amendment as a practical mechanism to strengthen accountability and distribution of TANF funds at the local level.

Why This Issue Matters

TANF is designed to reduce hardship among low-income families; however, low participation and high balances of unspent TANF funds suggest that eligible families may face barriers to access or that funds are not being directed toward the program's primary poverty-alleviation purposes. National analyses have found that only a small share of families in poverty receive TANF cash assistance, and state-level participation can be substantially lower than the national average.

Poverty disproportionately affects children and is associated with negative outcomes including food insecurity, poor academic performance, and long-term economic disadvantage. These impacts can vary by geographic area and demographic factors, including race and household structure. Improving the transparency and local accountability of TANF spending can help ensure that resources are reaching eligible families in a timely manner, particularly in counties with high child poverty rates.

Stakeholder Analysis

Key stakeholders include TDHS leadership and program administrators; county-level nonprofit and government providers; state legislators and policy staff; advocacy organizations focused on poverty reduction; and families who are eligible for TANF assistance. Potential supporters include poverty advocacy groups, community providers seeking clearer funding pathways, and constituents affected by low TANF access. Potential opposition may come from stakeholders concerned about administrative expansion, staffing costs, or philosophical opposition to public assistance programs.

Advocacy Strategy and Action Steps

The campaign strategy centers on reintroducing HB 0137/SB 0144 and advancing the DAT amendment to strengthen county-level implementation and reporting. Key action steps include: identifying a legislative sponsor; developing a concise bill brief and one-page fact sheet; engaging a coalition of nonprofit and community partners; and using a data-informed messaging strategy emphasizing accountability, transparency, and helping eligible families access existing resources.

Action Steps:

- Legislative engagement: Secure a sponsor in both chambers and provide a bill brief outlining the DAT amendment and anticipated implementation plan.
- Coalition building: Partner with local nonprofits, faith-based organizations, and community action agencies to demonstrate county-level need and readiness.

- Public communication: Develop talking points and community-friendly materials that explain the TANF surplus issue and the purpose of DAT oversight.
- Media strategy: Submit op-eds and coordinate interviews emphasizing responsible fund stewardship and improved access for eligible families.
- Implementation planning: Outline staffing, training, and reporting expectations for DATs, including county-level metrics and annual summaries.
- Evaluation and accountability: Propose simple performance indicators (e.g., county allotment utilization rate, number of families served, and time-to-allocation).

Anticipated Unintended Consequences and Mitigation

Potential unintended consequences include increased administrative costs associated with staffing and training DAT personnel, inconsistent county implementation, and resistance from providers concerned about oversight. These concerns can be mitigated through phased implementation, standardized training, clear guidance on provider eligibility, and transparent reporting procedures that prioritize support and technical assistance rather than punitive monitoring.

Conclusion

Reintroducing HB 0137/SB 0144 with an amendment establishing Direct Access Teams provides a feasible approach to strengthening local accountability and improving the distribution of TANF funds in Tennessee. By enhancing coordination between TDHS and county providers, DATs can help ensure that TANF resources support eligible families more effectively and reduce persistent gaps in access and outcomes.

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