

Shrinking aid for Ohio's poorest families

Wendy Patton

The poorest families in Ohio face increasing demands that they work to get aid. Many who have been unable to meet work participation requirements have been diverted or dismissed from Ohio's cash assistance program since 2011. Similar requirements are about to be applied to food stamps for many Ohioans.

The cash assistance program under Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) requires at least half of those able to work to be engaged in work activities. Many counties lack job opportunities, so work slots are provided for some. Ohio struggled to meet the work participation requirement during the recession. Dwindling state and federal resources and looming federal penalties drove some localities to divert adults from the "Ohio Works First" cash assistance program, according to a recent assessment done by the state.

Read Wendy Patton's in-depth interviews with the directors of three county Job and Family Services agencies around Ohio. These experienced leaders work every day in our communities, and make innovative recommendations to improve Ohio's policies for poor families. Online at www.policymattersohio.org/tanf-nov2013.

Caseloads dropped by 45 percent while the unemployment rate remains above 7 percent for all workers and above 16 percent for those without a high school diploma. Adult participation dropped by almost two-thirds and child participation by a third: the program serves 61,000 fewer children now than it did in 2011.

In most of Ohio's 88 counties, work participation will also be required for food aid through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps) for many, although many counties lack means to provide work activity slots. This part of the federal law was waived during the recession. The waiver expires in federal fiscal year 2015. Ohio chose to end the waiver for 72 counties in 2014. Starting January 1, county job and family service agencies will need to help up to 134,000 adults meet work participation requirements to get food aid. This will be a challenge to the human service delivery system and to the people who rely on food aid.

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assistance Ohio for a family of three was \$497 and cash assistance was \$458 per month. Together, this makes up about 60 percent of the federal poverty level. Policy Matters Ohio interviewed County Job and Family Services directors to understand how Ohio could improve aid to Ohio's poorest families. Ideas include:

- **Accept the statewide federal waiver allowing adults without disabilities to receive food aid for one year without work requirements.** This would allow the state and counties to take the next year to develop necessary social service infrastructure to meet the needs for the federal requirement in federal fiscal year 2015 when it comes due as planned.
- **Make sure other programs are working properly.** Modernize unemployment insurance so low-income workers could qualify and avoid Ohio Works First altogether. Ohio's unemployment compensation law is structured so that many workers earn too little to qualify. Ohio needs to change the law so that the growing low-wage sector receives the same kind of safety net that other workers get. In addition, the state should work to speed approval for disability assistance. One county director estimated that the disability approval process may take up to 24 months. Timely approval would help families with disabilities.
- **Invest more TANF dollars in direct aid to families.** A family of three gets about \$955 between food and cash aid, just 59 percent of the federal poverty level. The support is so low that each day is a fight for survival. An additional \$100 per recipient per month in TANF and the same in food assistance would bring the family to 96 percent of the poverty level, which could ease the daily struggle for survival, allowing recipients to focus on skills training and job search activities to move out of poverty.
- **Revise sanction policies.** Reliance on punitive sanctions for inability to meet work requirements does not help families. Full-family sanctions can lead to case closures, and caseloads decline when the family cannot regain eligibility through compliance. This may improve the work participation rate but it does not represent improved engagement in work activities.

Read the interviews with County Job and Family Service Directors for more insight into Ohio's work participation programs, ideas on how to increase aid needed by Ohio's poorest people, and ways to promote self-sufficiency for the long term.