

TANF Reform Failing Poorest Families

According to an August Census report, the number of people living in extreme poverty – those with incomes below half of the poverty line – has jumped sharply to the highest level on record. Among children, the increase from 2000 to 2003 was 21 percent. Yet according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, during that same 3-year period the number of people receiving TANF cash assistance fell by 9 percent.

The health and well-being of children living at below half the poverty line is a grave concern because they are at such high risk of health problems and educational failure. Everyone wants their numbers to decrease. And during tough economic times, the TANF Program is supposed to help in this regard by providing a measure of stability until the very poor can again begin moving back toward self-sufficiency. Obviously, on the national level, that did not happen from 2000 – 2003.

Here in Pennsylvania, the number of persons supported by TANF fell from about 240,000 in 2000 to about 235,000 in 2003. This decline (2 percent) is somewhat better than the national average. Nevertheless it reflects the same fundamental problem: the last line of defense – TANF – is increasingly unavailable to the most needy. For the sake of the children, this is not how we want the system to work.