

Testimony for Senate Finance Committee Hearing

**“Issues in TANF Reauthorization: Building
Stronger Families”**

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Presented by

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My name is Kate Kahan, I am the executive director for WEEL, Working for Equality and Economic Liberation, a Montana based organization focused on poverty issues. WEEL works with people in poverty across Montana, in the western region and nationally. I am here today with one of our allies, the National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support. WEEL has been a strong presence in the national arena surrounding welfare reauthorization, specifically utilizing the state experience with welfare reform to contribute information, lessons learned and model policy to the national debate. Given that focus, I am pleased to have the opportunity to testify before you regarding building stronger families not only from the state perspective, but from a personal one as well. The testimony I offer you today comes from experience, both my own experience living in poverty and receiving welfare, and the experience of the many low and no income families we work with.

When I first applied for welfare at 6 months pregnant, with little to no job experience, I was denied assistance due to the fact that I had \$7 too much in my bank account. I married the father of my child and even married, with two incomes we were poor. My family qualified for food stamps and Medicaid. After a year of being belittled, manipulated, harassed, physically assaulted and verbally abused, I fled a violent home. The day my ex-husband hit me and shoved me across the room while holding our son, I left and never went back. I wanted my son to grow up in a healthy and safe home so he could thrive, I didn't want him to witness violence and despair every day of his life. I began receiving welfare and going to college. While in college I had a work-study job in a field that I knew I wanted to pursue employment in after completing my degree. The education and experience I gained ultimately helped me move out of poverty. Marriage was not

the solution to my poverty or my son's poverty. If I had not left that violent home, I can assure you I would not be here today, I would have died.

This story is reflective of many other women on welfare today. In the past 12 months, over 50% of WEEL's advocacy calls, which are specifically focused on welfare, have been domestic violence related. Welfare offices are focused on case load reduction and keeping people off of welfare and that puts women attempting to leave violent homes in a situation no-one should ever have to face. Women facing violence should never have to make the choice between the security of food on the table for their children and continued violence. Far too many women in poverty are facing this devastating situation. National statistics reflect Montana's experience, as many as 60% of women on welfare have experienced domestic violence in their adult lifeⁱ. Marriage promotion will not help these women in crisis leave, it will only serve as yet another barrier to leaving and that will not, under any circumstances, solve the poverty they face. Similarly, diverting welfare funds away from direct assistance for families into marriage promotion classes in high schools, abstinence only education, divorce and pre-marital counseling and advertising campaigns touting the benefits of marriage targeted at low-income families will not reduce poverty. Such efforts merely side-step the very real and complex issues surrounding poverty in our country. For example, along with the rise in domestic violence, Montana, one of many rural states represented on this committee, also has a child poverty rate of 21%, the fastest growing poverty rate in the country. Our wages are 48th in the nation and we have the highest number of people working more than one job to make ends meet in the countryⁱⁱ. People are working 2 and 3 jobs and they are still poor. Marriage is not the solution to poverty in Montana, women are facing domestic violence at alarming rates and wages are so low in Montana that two parent households are just as poor as single parent households. Nationally, the situation is similar, 40% of women on TANF are or have been married and 40% of children in poverty are in two parent families.ⁱⁱⁱ These factors point out that there is no cookie cutter approach to welfare reform and building stronger families.

It is time to move beyond oversimplified, band aid approaches to welfare reform like marriage promotion and increased work hours for families in need and start focusing on family strengthening by ensuring reasonable work participation goals, rather than diverting resources to 'keep families busy',^{iv} supporting the work families are engaged in with supports like child care, housing and Medicaid, and protection from domestic violence. In addition, the time clock MUST be suspended when families are doing what they are supposed to. When I was on welfare, doing everything I was supposed to and then some, every time I met with my case worker he asked me if I could afford to be more poor this month than next because my time clock was ticking. The result was more discouragement than encouragement to continue meeting my requirements. Time clocks are counterproductive and must be stopped when families are working to meet their requirements for assistance. These are the measures that will provide needed assistance and support for families working to move out of poverty. Poverty is complex, welfare reform must include policies that address that fact to strengthen families.

Polling data shows that the American public is in favor of such supportive policies. A recent poll conducted by the National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support found that 62% of Americans surveyed cited work support for people moving from welfare to good jobs as the top priority for Congress in reauthorizing TANF. In contrast, merely 5% cited marriage promotion as a priority^v. Similar findings have been reported in the PEW Forum on Religion & Public Life^{vi}, the Packard Foundation^{vii}, the Ms. Foundation^{viii}, and Annie E. Casey^{ix}. The public clearly supports expansions in access to education and training, adequate income supports and poverty reduction rather than legislating marriage.

Coming from a rural state, one that has recently experienced a dramatic rise in our welfare rolls after a drastic drop in 1996, it is clear that we need to take a more comprehensive approach to welfare reform, one that will support families to move out of poverty rather than encourage low-wage employment that keeps people coming back to welfare to make ends meet. TANF Reauthorization is the perfect opportunity to create policy that addresses this dynamic by ensuring that

families have access to quality education and training programs, support while engaged in such programs, options to secure care for their young children and proven paths to jobs that pay well. Such measures will build stronger families. States need support to address the needs of their poor citizens, not a boost in bureaucracy and over simplified approaches like marriage promotion. Policies must ensure families have options and protection when leaving violent homes and approach family strengthening through actual poverty reduction measures that have been proven to work, rather than involving government in our private lives through economically coerced marriage.

Finally, I appreciate the opportunity to testify here today. It is essential to hear from the people who have been directly impacted by poverty. Our experience as a group that creates poverty alleviation policy in Montana certainly speaks to the fact that policies created with the input of the people that will be most impacted by them are the most successful. Thank you.

ⁱ Richard M Tolman & Jody Raphael, “A Review of Research on Welfare and Domestic Violence”

ⁱⁱ Northwest Job Gap Study, Montana Department of Labor, Montana Department of Health and Human Services

ⁱⁱⁱ United States Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, Series No. P20-514, Marriage Status and Living Arrangements: March 1998 (Update 2000)

^{iv} Children’s Defense Fund. Gordon Berlin March 12 testimony.

^v Peter D. Hart Research Associates. “TANF/Welfare Survey Findings.” National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support Memo, April 12, 2002.

^{vi} The PEW Research Center for People and the Press and the PEW Forum on Religion & Public Life, “Americans Struggle with Religion’s Role at Home and Abroad,” News Release, March 20, 2002

^{vii} Lake Snell Perry & Associates, Inc. “Public Views on Welfare Reform and Children in the Current Economy”

^{viii} Ms. Foundation for Women. “Americans Say Welfare Should Provide Self-Sufficiency Skills, Move People Out of Poverty-Not Promote Marriage”. February 6, 2002.

^{ix} Peter D Hart Research Associates, Inc. “Memorandum to Advocates for Low-Income Families”