

TESTIMONY OF KYRA ROBY

Policy Director, One Voice



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To Representative Robert Johnson, Senator Derrick Simmons, other members of the Mississippi Legislature, and fellow Mississippians:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the critical issue of our Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, particularly as it relates to poverty in Mississippi. My name is Kyra Roby, the Policy Director at One Voice.

One Voice is an organization that was created to address the issues facing Mississippi's marginalized and vulnerable communities through effective policy analysis and a trained network of community leaders and non-partisan, community-based structures. Since its beginning, One Voice has leveraged its expertise in policy analysis and research, community and civic engagement, and leadership development to ensure an equal voice to traditionally silenced communities.

One Voice stands with individuals and families affected by Mississippi's misuse of TANF funds, both through scandal and administrative barriers. We are committed to advocating for accountability and ensuring eligible families receive the resources they need, while also pushing for reforms to expand access to those who currently fall outside eligibility but would benefit from support. Our focus is on prioritizing the needs of the state's most vulnerable, restoring trust in safety net programs and reducing poverty, and building a system that genuinely supports the economic well-being of all in our community.

So, like you will likely hear today, we, too, are advocating for TANF reforms that:

1. Increase the TANF benefit to a level that actually supports families and helps them escape the cycle of poverty.
2. Simplify the eligibility process, reduce administrative hurdles, end behavioral control and restrictions to accessing assistance, and ensure that the program is reaching the families who need it most
3. Use TANF funding for its original purpose—helping families with children attain economic stability. As you know, too many of our state's TANF funds have been diverted away from direct assistance and towards non-essential services, leaving many families without the support they urgently need.

Ultimately, cash assistance in programs like TANF is essential in addressing poverty in Mississippi, providing immediate and flexible support to families struggling to meet basic needs. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, cash assistance is an important tool for helping people move out of poverty. Every family has basic needs that only can be met with cash. For families with low-incomes, these funds can make the difference between paying for

rent, utilities, or putting food on the table. Cash assistance can stabilize families facing crises after losing a job, fleeing domestic violence, or other destabilizing situations. Cash assistance can also promote racial equity by reducing economic disparities that disproportionately harm Black and other children. And cash assistance can help children succeed. Research shows that poverty harms children and that cash assistance can improve low-income children's health as well as their future educational attainment and earnings.

To paint the picture, newly released data from the Census Bureau show that nationwide poverty levels in 2023 remained near historic lows, building on the progress seen during the COVID-19 pandemic as federal relief programs were crucial in reducing poverty in recent years. While these measures have since expired, the 2023 data shows that nationally, the poverty rate remains significantly below pre-pandemic levels.

However, Mississippi continues to struggle with high poverty rates. In 2023, the U.S. poverty rate was 12.5%, while Mississippi's was 18%. Poverty among seniors in the state reached 15.8%, compared to the national average of 11.3%. And child poverty was 23.2% in Mississippi, well above the national rate of 16%.

For its part, TANF reform can and should do significantly more to reduce poverty in Mississippi. This can be done by addressing the program's current limitations and making it more effective at supporting low-income families.

For example, nationally, cash assistance to families experiencing poverty has fallen dramatically since TANF's start 28 years ago in 1996. Mississippi's TANF Program is doing even less to help Mississippi families in poverty.

Compared to the number of families experiencing poverty, Mississippi has one of the lowest TANF-to-poverty ratios in the nation. In 2019-2020, for every 100 families living in poverty in Mississippi, only 4 received TANF cash assistance.

Since 1995-1996, not only has the number of families with children receiving TANF declined significantly, the number of families in poverty and families in deep poverty receiving TANF has also declined. In 1995, Mississippi served 48,904 families with children; in 2020, the state served only 2,774. This includes a decrease from serving 124,326 families in poverty in 1995-1996 to serving 75,022 families in poverty in 2020. This also includes a decrease in serving 61,925 families in deep poverty in 1995-1996 to serving only 30,850 families in deep poverty in 2020.

The issue here is that poverty is complex. However, it is a policy choice and addressing it requires a comprehensive approach that is achievable. Strengthening our safety net must go beyond TANF.

For example, SNAP is one of the nation's oldest and most effective anti-poverty programs. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), SNAP kept nearly 8 million people above the poverty line annually before the pandemic, including 3.6 million children.

Specifically, in Mississippi, between 2016 and 2018, SNAP lifted 103,000 Mississippians above the poverty line, including 47,000 children.

Reforming TANF and SNAP together would create a stronger safety net by addressing different aspects of poverty—TANF offers cash assistance and job support, while SNAP ensures food security. Coordinating both programs would streamline access, allowing families to qualify for both without navigating separate systems. TANF’s focus on workforce development and SNAP’s role in meeting nutritional needs would break poverty cycles by addressing immediate survival and long-term economic stability. Together, these reforms would combat food and income insecurity, providing families with the stability to focus on employment, education, and housing improvements.

In another example, the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit work effectively alongside other anti-poverty programs, such as TANF and SNAP. These credits boost incomes for families paid low wages, for adults not raising children who work low-paid jobs, and for caregivers facing barriers to employment. They can also help address imbalances in the tax system that ask the most of people who earn the least. By providing additional financial resources, these credits can reduce the burden on state-funded assistance programs while helping families transition toward greater self-sufficiency.

Moreover, child tax credits and EITCs both reduce poverty and improve racial equity. According to the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, in 2018, the federal Child Tax Credit coupled with the Earned Income Tax Credit together lifted more children above the poverty line, 5.5 million across the country, than any other economic support program.

Too, nationally, the temporarily expanded federal Child Tax Credit, when combined with other pandemic relief measures, drove the child poverty rate to a record low of 5.2 percent in 2021. The Rescue Plan’s expanded credit reduced hardship for children of all races and ethnicities — with the greatest reduction in child poverty rates for Black, Latino, and American Indian and Alaska Native children — and narrowed the differences in poverty rates between them in 2021.

In Mississippi, a state Child Tax Credit similar to the expanded federal credit could be the most effective policy for reducing child poverty. Recently, a new report published by the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy concluded that a well-designed Child Tax Credit could help hundreds of thousands of Mississippians and lift tens of thousands of children out of poverty.

A refundable state Child Tax Credit of \$3,000 with a 20 percent credit boost for young children under six could cut Mississippi's child poverty rate in half and lift 59,000 kids out of poverty. This would benefit between 498,000 and 632,000 Mississippi children – or 75 and 95 percent of all kids, depending on the design elements of the credit.

A smaller \$1,400 refundable Child Tax Credit – with the same credit boost for young kids - could reduce the state child poverty rate by 25 percent and lift 29,000 kids out of poverty. This

would benefit between 456,000 and 610,000 Mississippi children – or 69 and 92 percent of all kids, depending on the design elements of the credit.

Meanwhile, nationally, the EITC has an outsized impact in reducing poverty rates for households of color. Eleven states have adopted child tax credits, and 31 states plus D.C. and Puerto Rico have adopted state EITCs.

Lastly, in addition to these policy options, to reduce poverty and complement any progress made from future TANF reforms, we need to expand access to quality healthcare, continue to invest in education, increase the minimum wage, invest in affordable housing, implement paid family leave and childcare support, and support workforce development programs that provide a pathway to good-paying jobs. These actions will not only reduce poverty but also create a more resilient and equitable Mississippi.

In all, federal action, especially since the pandemic and with historic program investments, has clearly improved lives. Data clearly show that federal efforts can uplift communities, and the decisions made today will shape the future of economic and health equity in the U.S. Now is the time for Mississippi lawmakers to build on these successes and make a crucial choice for the state's future. The cost of inaction is far too great.

Mississippi has an opportunity to be a leader in the fight against poverty. It starts with a commitment from this legislature to build a safety net that works for all of our people. I urge you to seize this moment, strengthen TANF, consider other anti-poverty reforms and policy measures, and take meaningful steps to reduce poverty in our state. Together, we can create a future where every Mississippian has the opportunity to thrive.

Thank you for your time and attention to this critical issue. I am happy to answer any questions the committee may have.

Respectfully,

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