

Report: NM's TANF program in need of more comprehensive approach

Written by By NM Voices for Children
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Nothing spent on education and job training; benefits like child care assistance not well coordinated

ALBUQUERQUE—New Mexico's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program—what was formerly known as 'welfare'—could do a much better job of helping families find educational pathways out of poverty. No TANF money is spent on education and training services that help parents gain credentials and secure family-sustaining employment. And while a significant percentage of TANF funding is used to pay for services like child care assistance and NM Pre-K, too few families with young children who receive TANF benefits are able to take advantage of these programs.

That is among the conclusions in a report released today by New Mexico Voices for Children. The report discusses the value of taking a two-generational approach to decreasing poverty and improving child well-being. This means linking and aligning services for children and parents. Programs and services linked in this way tend to produce better outcomes than do those offered in isolation.

"Poverty is a complex issue with many causes, but we know that education and skills training that helps parents get jobs that pay family-sustaining wages are a smart way to not only combat poverty but also develop our workforce, which benefits our local businesses and our economy," said James Jimenez, executive director of the child advocacy agency. "Unfortunately, New Mexico spends very little TANF funds on work-related supports and nothing on education and training. That leaves us with a program where the primary objective is to get parents into a job—any job—regardless of whether the income is enough to support the family. That's not a long-term strategy for poverty reduction or economic growth," he added.

Another weakness with the state's TANF program is that much of the funding is spent on services that do not end up benefitting TANF families. For example, child care assistance receives \$31 million in TANF funding, but only 4 percent of TANF families receive this benefit even though almost half of children receiving TANF are under the age of five.

"When parents are at work or furthering their education and training, they need access to affordable child care," said Armelle Casau, a research and policy analyst for NM Voices and one of the report's authors. "And since all families receiving TANF meet the financial eligibility

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requirements for child care assistance it's disconcerting that so few receive it. The state needs to do more to help these families access quality child care programs so their children don't end up in unregulated and unsafe child care situations. Quality child care programs provide safe learning environments that help increase early reading skills and school readiness."

The executive summary and the full report, *Turning Assistance into Opportunity: Improving TANF and Implementing Two-Generational Solutions to Help New Mexico Families Access Educational Pathways out of Poverty*, a KIDS

COUNT special report, are available online at

www.nmvoices.org/archives/8204

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