

Increased Access to SNAP Food Assistance Reduces Risk of Child Welfare Involvement

West Virginia places four times as many children per capita into the foster care system as the United States as a whole. Most foster care entries in West Virginia are related to substance use or neglect—not abuse. Poverty and lack of access to substance use treatment are major drivers of foster care entry.¹ To solve our state’s foster care crisis, we must greatly reduce the flow of children into the foster care system by prioritizing primary prevention: keeping families intact when it can be done safely.

This requires providing evidence-based concrete economic and social supports to families before they are in crisis. **States’ total spending on primary supports like cash assistance, housing infrastructure, child care assistance, refundable tax credits, and Medicaid is inversely associated with all child maltreatment outcomes.**²

What is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)?

SNAP is the nation’s most important and effective anti-hunger program. In FY 2022, **it helped one in six West Virginians put food on the table, with three out of five SNAP participants in households with children.** Between 2014-2018, SNAP benefits lifted 20,000 West Virginia children above the poverty line. SNAP benefits are funded using 100 percent federal dollars, meaning states are only responsible for financing administrative costs associated with benefit distribution.³

How Does SNAP Improve Child Welfare?

- ✔ States with more generous SNAP policies experienced larger reductions in Child Protective Services (CPS) reports, fewer substantiated reports for neglect, and fewer foster care placements.⁴
- ✔ For every 5 percent increase in the number of families receiving SNAP benefits, there is an 8–14 percent reduction in CPS and foster care caseloads. Notably, these reductions are particularly large in states offering transitional SNAP benefits for families leaving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a policy option not currently utilized in West Virginia.⁵
- ✔ Being located near a SNAP authorized retailer in rural areas is associated with decreased maltreatment reports and substantiations.⁶

How Can We Improve SNAP in West Virginia?

- ➔ In West Virginia, SNAP reaches 88 percent of eligible individuals, a strong rate but one which can be improved upon through education and outreach.⁷
- ➔ West Virginia currently disqualifies parents (18–59) from SNAP benefits for an extended period if they fail to report meeting Employment and Training work requirements or an exemption from these requirements. This state policy is harsher than federal regulations require and reduces economic security for the whole household. West Virginia should follow federal regulations instead of needlessly enforcing harsher restrictions that negatively impact household well-being.⁸
- ➔ West Virginia should provide transitional SNAP benefits to households losing their TANF benefits. At least 23 states currently do so.⁹

1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. The AFCARS Report: West Virginia FY 2021. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-tar-ww-2021.pdf>. Retrieved on August 22, 2023.

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PREVENTION IS POSSIBLE:

Increased Access to TANF Reduces Risk of Child Welfare Involvement

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What is Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)?

TANF is a federal block grant program that provides cash assistance to low-income families. Income supports like TANF, known in West Virginia as WV Works, help families in poverty maintain stability, promote children’s healthy development, and reduce child maltreatment. States administer TANF, as well as contribute some of their own matching dollars to the program. The first statutory goal of TANF is to **assist families in need so children can be cared for in their own homes or the homes of relatives.** In June 2023, only about 5,000 West Virginia households received TANF through WV Works.³

How Does TANF Improve Child Welfare?

- ✓ Mothers who participate in TANF and are eligible to receive full child support for their children are 10 percent less likely to be subject to a child maltreatment allegation. Increasing TANF benefits as little as \$100 per year reduces maltreatment reports and out-of-home placements.⁴
- ✓ State policies that restrict access to TANF (such as suspicion-based drug testing and disqualification when parents fail to meet work reporting requirements) are associated with increases in substantiated neglect cases, children entering foster care due to neglect, and children entering foster care due to abuse.⁵
- ✓ Reductions in state public benefit levels of TANF and SNAP (food assistance) are associated with higher numbers of children in foster care.⁶

How Can We Improve TANF in West Virginia?

- ➔ Eliminate drug screening as a condition of TANF.
- ➔ Stop punishing the entire family when a parent does not meet strict work reporting requirements for a single month. Several states have less severe sanctions for failing to meet work reporting requirements than West Virginia.⁷
- ➔ Spend West Virginia’s \$110 million in TANF reserve funds—equivalent to a full year of federal funding for the program—on primary prevention through economic supports. Some states fund, at least in part, their Earned Income Tax Credit programs with TANF funds.

1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. The AFCARS Report: West Virginia FY 2021. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-tar-wv-2021.pdf>. Retrieved on August 22, 2023.

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Medicaid Reduces Risk of Child Welfare Involvement

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What is Medicaid?

Medicaid is a public insurance program that provides health coverage to low-income families and individuals, including children, parents, those who are pregnant, seniors, and people with disabilities. It is jointly funded by the federal government and the states, but states are responsible for administering the program with a great deal of flexibility. West Virginia receives three dollars in federal funds for every state dollar spent on traditional Medicaid enrollees, and nine dollars in federal funds for every state dollar spent on Medicaid expansion enrollees.³ **Federal and state Medicaid funds improve health, create jobs, and keep local hospitals and providers afloat.**

How Does Medicaid Improve Child Welfare?

- ✓ Medicaid expansion is associated with improved economic stability and mental health for low-income parents. The rate of screen-in neglect reports decreased between 2013 and 2016 in states that expanded Medicaid over that period.⁴
- ✓ States with policies that facilitate continuity of eligibility for Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) have lower child maltreatment investigation rates than states without continuous eligibility.⁵
- ✓ Each additional \$1,000 in state spending per person on public benefits programs, including Medicaid and CHIP, is associated with a four percent reduction in child maltreatment reports and an eight percent reduction in child fatalities due to maltreatment.⁶

How Can We Improve Medicaid in West Virginia?

- ➔ Increase outreach about Medicaid and CHIP to reduce the number of children and families becoming uninsured during the return to pre-pandemic Medicaid rules and the end of the pandemic-initiated continuous coverage provision.
- ➔ Waive copays for CHIP to improve health care affordability for families.
- ➔ Leverage flexibilities to use Medicaid funding to address social determinants of health (SDOH) including providing non-medical supports related to housing and food for those with complex needs and allowing Medicaid to reimburse doulas and midwives for their services.

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Access to Unemployment Insurance Reduces Risk of Child Welfare Involvement

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What is Unemployment Insurance?

Unemployment insurance is a form of social insurance wherein contributions are paid into the system by employers on behalf of working people as a benefit so that they have income support if they lose their jobs. **The system helps families stay afloat during economic downturns by providing continuous income for families to spend on their basic household needs.** Most states, including West Virginia, provide up to 26 weeks of benefits to unemployed workers.³ In West Virginia, unemployment insurance benefits replace just 39 percent of wages on average.⁴

How Does Unemployment Insurance Improve Child Welfare?

- ✓ Economic shocks, including job loss, put families at increased risk of child welfare involvement. Generous unemployment insurance benefits mitigate the impact of these economic shocks and can reduce instances of neglect that result from increased stress related to inability to provide for one’s children.⁵
- ✓ States that extended the duration (weeks of eligibility) of unemployment benefits at the onset of the Great Recession saw smaller increases in substantiated neglect reports than states that did not extend benefits.⁶
- ✓ Increases in unemployment benefits are associated with decreased risk for child welfare involvement.⁷

How Can We Improve Unemployment Insurance in West Virginia?

- ➔ Expand eligibility to include all types of workers and increase benefit amounts to replace a greater percentage of workers’ lost income.
- ➔ Expand access to job training, public transportation, child care, and other services that address the needs of people who have recently lost their jobs and the needs of those otherwise outside of the workforce who face difficulty participating in the labor force due to systemic barriers.

1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. The AFCARS Report: West Virginia FY 2021. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-tar-ww-2021.pdf>. Retrieved on August 22, 2023.

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