



**Center for the
Study of
Social Policy**
Ideas into Action

TO: House Committee on Human Services, Vermont General Assembly

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SUBJECT: The Elimination of Work Requirements in H.672

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Dear Chair Pugh and Members of the House Committee on Human Services,

H.672's elimination of the work requirement in Vermont's Reach Up program is an important step forward for children and families. If enacted, this provision will ensure that families with children can continue to receive the income support they need, even if a parent or caregiver has significant barriers to employment, and eliminates significant administrative burdens for families and case managers that are associated with the work requirements.¹ Critically, by doing so, it will not only promote the health and economic well-being of children and families, but it will advance racial and economic justice.

Work requirements are responsible for deep and lasting racial and economic inequities, which can be traced back to their origins in slavery. Enslavers created and promulgated a myth that Black people do not want to work to justify the system from which they profited, and that racist stereotype was consistently invoked in the years after the formal end of slavery to justify work requirements in social welfare programs. From the beginning, these work requirements were used to coerce and exploit the labor of Black families. When Congress created Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) in 1996, the federal block grant program that provides some of Vermont's funding for Reach Up, they instituted stringent work participation rate requirements for states. Congress thereby institutionalized this racism in the nation's cash assistance program for families with children. To this day, Black families are more likely to be harmed by work requirements in TANF—both because they are more likely to live in states with stricter requirements, and because across states they are more likely to be sanctioned due to caseworker bias. While forged by racism, ultimately, work requirements harm families of all races and ethnicities, by denying them assistance they desperately need.

This memo briefly summarizes the research on how work requirements harm families today, and the roots of these policies in anti-Black racism, going back to slavery. A more detailed history can be found in the Center for the Study of Social Policy's report, [The Racist Roots of Work Requirements](#).

I. Work requirements produce deep racial and economic inequities.

Work requirements are typically justified as promoting work, and they are premised on the assumption that people do not want to work, and therefore need to be forced to work by public policy. But research has consistently shown that work requirements do not increase work in the wage labor force over the long term, or enable caregivers to find jobs that allow them to sustain their families.² The reason work requirements do not work, is that the root cause of the families' economic insecurity does not lie in parents' work ethic, but in economic and social policies that limit families' opportunities. For example, low-wage employers routinely provide unpredictable and insufficient hours, which can make it impossible for workers to earn a steady income.³ Systemic barriers including caregiving responsibilities, health challenges, race- and gender-based discrimination, and involvement in the criminal justice and child welfare systems can make it difficult for parents to get and keep a family-sustaining job.⁴ In this context, work requirements do not support work, but harm families by ultimately denying them the assistance they need to make ends meet. In the decade after TANF imposed strict federal work requirements on cash assistance, there was a corresponding increase in deep poverty among children.⁵ As sociologists Kathryn Edin and Luke Shaefer have shown, hundreds of thousands of families were left to live on less than two dollars of cash a day in the wake of the 1996 law.⁶

Black families and other families of color are disproportionately disadvantaged by TANF work requirements. As researchers at the Urban Institute have found, states with more Black families have harsher sanctions for not meeting work requirements. According to their 2017 study, a "5 percentage point increase in the African American share of the population is associated with a nearly 10 percentage point increase in the probability of having harsher initial sanctions."⁷ Research also suggests that racial bias influences caseworkers' decision to sanction a family for not meeting work requirements.⁸ One experiment found that caseworkers sanctioned Black families more often than White families when they were randomly assigned case studies with otherwise similar characteristics.⁹ These deep racial and economic inequities are rooted in the history of work requirements.

II. Work requirements are rooted in a long history of coercing and exploiting the labor of Black families.

Work requirements are a direct legacy of slavery. Slavery paved the way for work requirements by popularizing racist stereotypes of Black people to justify their forced labor—stereotypes that were later invoked to justify work requirements in social welfare programs. According to enslavers, Black people were inherently lazy, a condition, as enslavers put it, that "necessitated a master to force him to work."¹⁰ In the lead up to Civil War, pro-slavery ideologues spread this myth that Black people did not want to work to defend the system of slavery, publishing treatises, pamphlets, and newspaper articles decrying Black people's purported "idleness"—when in fact Black workers powered the American economy even as they were denied the profits of their labor.¹¹

After slavery's end, White officials invoked this racist stereotype to continue to force Black families to work for White people through social welfare policies denying them public assistance. During the New Deal, these practices were institutionalized, as Congress gave states control over new public assistance programs, thereby allowing southern states to wield these programs to reinforce the racial hierarchy. Southern states quickly instituted informal work requirements in the cash assistance program for families with children—denying Black families assistance in order to force them to work—as well as formal work requirements or "farm policies"—withholding assistance when workers were needed in the fields. In 1943, for example, Louisiana adopted a policy of denying cash assistance to families if they were needed in the cotton fields—including children as young as seven. Because cotton chopping was "traditionally relegated to Negroes," most if not all families denied assistance under the policy were

Black.¹² While these formal and informal requirements were initially limited to the South, over the latter half of the twentieth century policymakers' interest in a federal work requirement in cash assistance grew as anti-Black racism increasingly drove the national political debate over public assistance.

The racialization of welfare politics took off in the 1960s, as the media increasingly portrayed poor people and people receiving public assistance as Black—far out of proportion to their actual representation among poor welfare recipients.¹³ In response, politicians almost immediately began calling for a federal work requirement in cash assistance, and these calls only grew louder over the decades that followed. By the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan, who invoked the racist stereotype of the “welfare queen” to undermine support for cash assistance while campaigning for office, ardently supported requiring work of welfare recipients. In this period social scientists and intellectuals legitimized work requirements while also invoking racist stereotypes. For example Lawrence Mead, in his 1986 book *Beyond Entitlement*, argued that the central problem facing American society was “non-work,” and he invoked racist stereotypes of Black people when referring to this phenomenon, describing “non-work” as a problem of the “inner city” filled with drug dealers and welfare recipients. It was in the context of these portrayals of welfare recipients as Black people who did not want to work that Congress seriously experimented with work requirements in cash assistance, first through demonstration programs funded through the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, and then later in the Family Support Act (FSA) of 1988. When the FSA proved insufficiently effective at helping families move “from welfare to work,” President Bill Clinton worked with House Speaker Newt Gingrich and Congressional conservatives to “end welfare as we know it”—in part by imposing strict work requirements.

Black people were the image of welfare reform in the 1990s, and racist stereotypes and imagery were purveyed by both liberal and conservative politicians, institutions, and individuals. Speaker Gingrich invoked racist stereotypes of Black criminality and promiscuity during the debates, asserting “you can’t maintain civilization with twelve-year olds having babies and fifteen-year-olds killing each other and seventeen year olds dying of AIDS.” Jason DeParle, the *New York Times* reporter who chronicled welfare reform, received one letter at his *New York Times* address parroting Gingrich, asking “[W]hat does it take before the liberal reformers realize that 2000 years of civilization [sic] has passed black people by.”¹⁴ On August 12, 1996, *The New Republic*—a traditionally progressive newsmagazine—ran a photograph on its cover that updated the racist stereotype of black laziness for the welfare reform era, portraying an idle Black woman smoking a cigarette and holding a baby above the words “Sign the Welfare Bill Now.”¹⁵ Bill Clinton signed the bill creating TANF less than a week later, flanked by former cash assistance participants Lilian Harden and Penelope Howard. Both women were black.¹⁶

Ultimately, all families are harmed by the policies that have resulted from the racist history of work requirements. Work requirements were justified using racist dog whistles to obfuscate the real systemic failures making it difficult for parents to support their children: including inaccessible and unaffordable child care, inadequate transportation, and poor health care. They were used to make societal problems appear to be individual failures. And blaming individuals for systemic problems does nothing to lift them out of poverty. In the decades since the 1996 law was passed, cash assistance has become out of reach for many families who need it. In Vermont, while 80 out of every 100 families living in poverty received cash assistance in 1996, today only 49 out of every 100 families living in poverty do.¹⁷ Eliminating work requirements will dismantle inequities and ensure that families with children can access the support that they need—a critical step toward achieving anti-racist policy.

¹ On the paperwork and logistical hurdles that work requirements create in TANF, see Minoff, Elisa. “What do ‘Work Requirements’ Actually Require? A look at programs that meet families’ basic needs in Montgomery County, Maryland.” Center for the Study of Social Policy, June 2019. Available at: <https://cssp.org/resource/what-do-work-requirements-actually-require/>.

² Pavetti, Ladonna. “Work Requirements Don’t Cut Poverty, Evidence Shows.” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, June 7, 2016. Available at: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/work-requirements-dont-cut-poverty-evidence-shows>. Pavetti, Ladonna. “Evidence Doesn’t Support Claims of Success of TANF Work Requirements.” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, April 3, 2018. Available at: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/family-income-support/evidence-doesnt-support-claims-of-success-of-tanf-work-requirements>.

³ Grant, Kali et al. “Unworkable & Unwise: Conditioning Access to Programs that Ensure a Basic Foundation for Families on Work requirements.” Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality, Revised April 2019. Available at: <http://www.georgetownpoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/GCPI-ESOI-UnworkableUnwise-20190416.pdf>. Scheiber, Noam. “Despite Labor Shortages, Workers See Few Gains in Economic Security.” NYT, February 1, 2022. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/01/business/economy/part-time-work.html>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Trisi, Danilo and Matt Saenz. “Deep Poverty Among Children Rose in TANF’s First Decade, Then Fell as Other Programs Strengthened.” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, February 27, 2020. Available at: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/deep-poverty-among-children-rose-in-tanfs-first-decade-then-fell-as>.

⁶ Edin, Jathryn J. and H. Luke Shaefer. \$2.00 A Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America.

⁷ Hahn, Heather et al. “Why Does Cash Welfare Depend on Where You Live?” Urban Institute, June 2017. Available at: <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/why-does-cash-welfare-depend-where-you-live>.

⁸ McDaniel, Marla et al. “Identifying Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Human Services: A Conceptual Framework and Literature Review.” Urban Institute, November 2017. Available at: https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/94986/identifying-racial-and-ethnic-disparities-in-human-services_1.pdf.

⁹ Schram, Sanford F. et al. “Deciding to Discipline: Race, Choice, and Punishment on the Frontlines of Welfare Reform.” *American Sociological Review*, June 1, 2009. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/000312240907400304>.

¹⁰ Jenkins, William Sumner. *Proslavery Thought in the Old South*. University of North Carolina Press, 1935, p. 251. Available at: <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000407909>.

¹¹ Faust, Drew Gilpin. *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860*. Louisiana State University Press, 1981,

¹² Winifed Bell, *Aid to Dependent Children*. Columbia University Press, 1965, p. 46.

¹³ Gilens, Martin. “How the Poor Became Black: The Racialization of American Poverty in the Mass Media.” In Schram, Sanford F. et al. *Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*. University of Michigan Press, 2003.

¹⁴ DeParle, Jason. *American Dream: Three Women, Ten Kids, and a Nation’s Drive to End Welfare*. Penguin Books, 2005.

¹⁵ For cover, see

<https://images.newrepublic.com/42e2f84741538c923d885552ab206fb31c4219eb.jpeg?w=800&q=65&dpi=2.625&fm=pjpg&h=1036>.

¹⁶ Demby, Gene. “The Mothers Who Fought to Radically Reimagine Welfare.”

¹⁷ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “State Fact Sheets: Trends in State TANF-to-Poverty Ratios.” Updated November 30, 2020. Available at: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/family-income-support/state-fact-sheets-trends-in-state-tanf-to-poverty-ratios>.