

Addressing barriers on the path to self-sufficiency

In 1996, the federal government replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, hoping to “end the dependence of needy families on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work and marriage.” A central goal was to provide families with the resources, tools and incentives needed to become self-reliant and break the cycle of poverty. A five-year time limit was placed on monthly aid combined with financial sanctions for failure to comply with program requirements.

To implement TANF, California enacted AB 1542 in 1997. This legislation established the California Work

Opportunities and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program to help move poor families from welfare to work. While most other states terminate aid to the entire family when parents don't succeed in their TANF program, California provides ongoing aid to children when parents “time out” or are “sanctioned” for non-compliance.

Child-only cases now the norm in California

In the decade since California implemented CalWORKs, the composition of the state's welfare population has changed radically. When the program began, the vast majority of welfare grants included an adult. Now more than half of CalWORKs cases provide aid just for the children. This shift results, for a family of three, in the loss of about 19% of the family's grant. About half the loss can be recouped in additional Food Stamps.

In California, five situations define almost all cases where the aid is provided for children only:

1. Parents lose their share of aid after reaching their five-year (60 month) lifetime limit (timed-out / safety net cases).
2. Parents lose their share of the family grant for non-compliance with program requirements (sanction cases).
3. Parents do not qualify to receive aid because of their immigration status, but citizen children in the family are eligible for support (immigrant parent cases).
4. Parents receive Supplemental Security Income due to age, blindness or disability (SSI parent cases).
5. Children receiving aid live with kin or other caregivers who are considered non-needy (non-parental caregiver cases).

Safety net and sanction cases, the topic of this policy brief, currently account for 33% of child-only cases.

Why are parents losing aid?

Relatively little attention has been paid to child-only cases. While in the early years of welfare reform many studies focused on TANF participants and “leavers,” very little is known about families whose aid has been restricted to just their children.

History of CalWORKs Child-only Study

In 2006, seven northern California counties initiated the CalWORKs Child-only Study, commissioning Oakland-based Speigman Norris Associates to investigate the characteristics and nature of the rising number of child-only cases. The Study's first report, based on county administrative data, is available at www.cfpic.org.

Five of the counties requested additional information that resulted in a face-to-face survey with mothers who had been sanctioned or who had timed out of the program. This policy brief discusses findings from the interviews and makes policy-oriented recommendations for improving outcomes for these families. The full report by Speigman and Li, *Barriers to Work: CalWORKs Parents Timed-Out or Sanctioned in Five Counties*, is posted at www.cfpic.org.

The Child and Family Policy Institute of California (CFPIC) became involved with the Child-Only Study early on. CFPIC's executive director is a member of the study's advisory committee and has assisted with facilitation of advisory committee and study site meetings. Currently, CFPIC serves as the institutional center for a collaborative effort to extend the study by researching child well-being.

Study Design

The information in this brief is based on a cross-sectional study of safety net/timed-out and sanctioned parents associated with child-only cases in five northern California counties representing a range of economic, demographic and urban/suburban/rural contexts. This study is the second in a series presenting research on the composition, characteristics and needs of child-only cases.

Six Study Sites in Five Counties

The study sample was drawn from six sites:

	SAFETY NET CASES	SANCTION CASES
Alameda County	x	x
City/County of San Francisco	x	
San Mateo County		x
Santa Clara County	x	
Stanislaus County	x	

In the most recent phase of the study, investigators conducted face-to-face interviews with a random sample of 143 female parents associated with CalWORKS child-only cases in five counties. The interviewees were 18 years and older, spoke English, Spanish or Vietnamese, and had either been sanctioned or timed-out from receiving income assistance for themselves. The overall response rate was 51%. Because of timing and availability of information from which the potential sample was drawn, the sample represents parents in families with somewhat longer episodes as child-only cases than the average.

Interviews took place during the summer and fall of 2007. The survey took about one hour and covered a variety of topics, including demographics, employment status and work experience, household income, material hardships, child care, respondent's physical health, respondent's cognitive and mental health, respondent's use of alcohol and other drugs, respondent's experience of partner abuse and partner control, children's health, and need for and receipt of services.

Study limitations and interpretation of findings. The study provides descriptive documentation of individual county samples rather than comparative analyses. The number of people surveyed is limited, making it difficult to extrapolate findings to the larger population and limiting the ability for cross-site comparison. Combined site results cannot be used to estimate the characteristics of any specific child-only case population.

STUDY SAMPLE

Age. Respondent age ranged from 18 to 58 years, and the average age in the six samples varied from 32.1 years (San Mateo County sanction) to 38.7 years (Santa Clara County safety net).

Race/ethnicity. In Alameda County and in San Francisco, the majority of mothers interviewed were African American. In San Mateo and Stanislaus counties, the plurality group was Latino/Hispanic. In Santa Clara County, the plurality group was Asian.

Household size. The mean household size ranged from about four

(San Francisco safety net and Alameda County sanction and safety net) to about five (San Mateo County sanction, Santa Clara County safety net, Stanislaus County safety net). Mean number of children in households varied from 2.2 (Alameda County sanction) to 2.8 (Santa Clara County safety net).

Age of youngest child. The average age of the youngest child varied from 5.7 years (San Mateo sanction) to 8.6 years (Alameda County sanction). Overall, 42% of mothers had a child under age 6.

14 EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS DEFINED

Human Capital

- *Education level:* Less than high school diploma or General Equivalency Diploma (GED).
- *Lack of full-time work experience:* Last worked 30 or more hours per week three or more years ago, if ever.

Personal Health

- *Physical health problem:* Self-rated fair or poor health, or limiting physical health condition.
- *Learning disability:* Needed extra help with school/learning or diagnosed with learning disability.
- *Mental health problem:* Limiting mental health condition, or depression, generalized anxiety disorder or stressful events in last 12 months.
- *Alcohol or drug problem:* Abused or dependent on alcohol or other drugs in the last 12 months.
- *Domestic violence:* Experienced physical or sexual abuse by a partner in the last 12 months.
- *Partner control:* Intimate partner discouraged, did not help, harassed, or made it difficult for respondent to go to work, school or training, or caused the respondent to lose a job, or drop out of school or training in the last 12 months.

Family Responsibilities

- *Young children:* Has a child under age 6.
- *Child care need:* Getting child care has been a problem in finding or keeping a job in the last 12 months.

• *Child with health condition:* Child has limiting health condition that prevents her/him from basic activities such as eating and walking without assistance.

Material Hardships

- *Transportation:* Has no driver's license or no access to a car, or quit a job or was unable to start a job in the last 12 months due to transportation problems.
- *Housing instability:* Living in another person's place, in a shelter, homeless on the street, or moved out of home two or more times in the last 12 months.
- *Reliance on emergency food:* Relies on emergency food programs (food banks, food pantries, or soup kitchens) for bags of food, bag lunches, or cooked meals.

Family Budget

Household Income and Supports

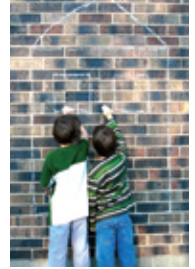
CalWORKS Grant. The most important and stable cash income for study participants was the CalWORKS grant for their children. Depending on the study site, the child-only grant averaged from \$406 to \$588 per month and comprised from one-fifth to one-half of monthly household income.

Earnings and Other Household Cash Income. Employment earnings accounted for the largest share of household cash income, excluding CalWORKS. Mothers also reported that in the past month their household had received, on average, \$19 in child support and \$97 in Social Security, SSI and/or disability payments. Other sums included rent paid by other household members and children’s employment earnings.

Non-Cash Assistance. Across all sites, 95% of non-cash income was derived from Food Stamps, valued on average at \$333 monthly.

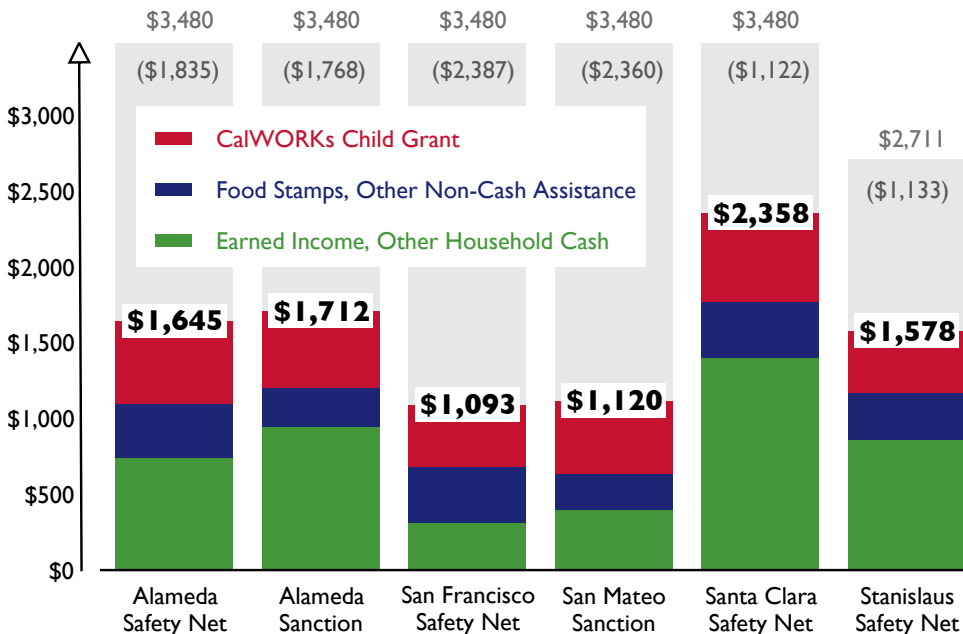
Housing Subsidies. Three of five study participants received housing subsidies. Those mothers who did not receive subsidies and lived in their own place spent more than half their income on housing.

Child Care Subsidies. One of six study participants with children under age 6 reported receiving help with child care costs from the CalWORKS program, another government program, or an employer.

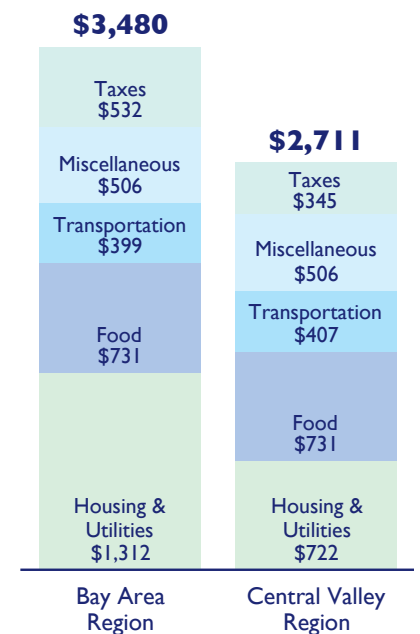


Family Budget Shortfalls

Average total monthly household income from all sources (including non-cash assistance but not the value of child care, housing or other subsidies) ranged from \$1,093 in San Francisco (mean household size of 4.0 with 2.5 children) to \$2,358 in Santa Clara County (mean household size of 5.0 with 2.8 children). This is about one-third to two-thirds of the “Basic Family Budget” as defined by the California Budget Project (but excluding the cost of health care since the vast majority of study participants were enrolled in Medi-Cal). As most study participants had two or more children and lived in a household with at least one other adult, the California Budget Project’s category for a “two parent family” with one working parent and no child care costs is used for comparison purposes.



Average Monthly Household Income (All Sources)



Basic Family Budget for 4



Barriers to employment were widespread and pervasive among mothers whose income assistance had been withdrawn. Barriers that were particularly prevalent included inadequate or no transportation, poor employment histories, and lack of a high school diploma/GED. Many mothers associated with sanctioned and safety net child-only cases had children under age 6 and experienced child care problems. Additional stressors included food and housing insecurities. Many faced family health challenges as well.

Human Capital Barriers

Education lower than GED / high school diploma. Two in five study participants lacked a high school diploma or GED. About one-third of participants in three of the safety net sites (Alameda, Santa Clara, and Stanislaus counties), but 56% of participants in San Francisco, had this barrier.

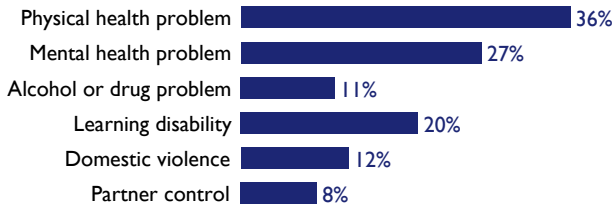
Lack of full-time work experience. Almost half of mothers had not worked 30 or more hours a week for at least one week within the past three years. This barrier ranged from 32% in San Francisco (safety net) to 60% in San Mateo (sanction) and Stanislaus (safety net) counties.

PREVALENCE OF EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS

Human Capital Barriers



Personal Health Barriers



Family Responsibility Barriers



Material Hardship Barriers



Personal Health Barriers

Physical health problem. Over one-third of study participants rated their physical health as fair or poor or had a limiting physical health condition. The prevalence of this barrier hovered between 28% to 38% in five of the six sites. In Stanislaus County (safety net), 52% of study participants had this barrier.

Mental health problem. About one-quarter of study participants were assessed as having mental health or emotional health problems in the last 12 months. In the two Alameda County sites the prevalence was below 10%. At the other extreme, 44% of Stanislaus County study participants had this barrier. Depending on the site, mental health barriers were two to ten times the general population rate for psychological distress.

Alcohol or drug problem. One in ten study participants was assessed as having an alcohol or drug abuse or dependence barrier in the last 12 months. Barrier prevalence rates ranged from 5% in the two Alameda County sites to 16% in San Francisco (safety net).

Learning disability. One in five study participants needed extra help with school or learning or had been diagnosed with a learning disability. This rate ranged from 10% in Alameda County (sanction) to 20% or more in San Francisco (safety net), Stanislaus County (safety net), and San Mateo County (sanction).

Domestic violence. One in eight study participants experienced either physical or sexual abuse by a partner in the last 12 months. The prevalence of this barrier ranged from 8% in Santa Clara County (safety net) and San Francisco to 19% in Alameda County (sanction).

Partner control. One in twelve study participants reported that in the last 12 months her intimate partner discouraged, harassed or made it difficult for her to go to work, school or training, or caused her to lose a job or drop out of school or training. There were no reports of partner control in two safety net sites: Alameda County and Santa Clara County. San Mateo County (sanction) and Stanislaus County (safety net) had prevalence rates of 8%. The rate was 12% in San Francisco (safety net) and 24% in Alameda County (sanction).

Family Responsibility Barriers

Child under age 6. Two in five study participants had a child under age 6. The prevalence of this barrier ranged from 33% in Alameda County (sanction) and 36% in Stanislaus County (safety net) to 52% in San Mateo County (sanction).

Child care problems. Almost one-third of study participants reported that child care was a problem in getting or keeping a job. Such reports ranged from 15% in Santa Clara County (safety net) and 16% in Stanislaus County (safety net) to 36% in San Mateo County (sanction).

Child with limiting health condition. Almost one-quarter of mothers reported that they had at least one child with a limiting health condition. Prevalence of this status ranged from 12% percent in Santa Clara County (safety net) and San Francisco (safety net) to 33% in Alameda County (safety net).

Material Hardship Barriers

Transportation. Nearly two-thirds of mothers either had no driver's license or no access to a car, or quit or did not start a job because of a transportation problem. This barrier ranged from 39% among Santa Clara County safety net respondents to as high as 80% in San Mateo County (sanction) and 84% in San Francisco (safety net).

Housing instability. One-third of study participants were assessed as experiencing residential instability in last 12 months. The prevalence of this barrier ranged from 8% among San Francisco (safety net) study participants to 52% among San Mateo County (sanction) participants.

Reliance on emergency food. Across the six study sites, one-quarter to one-half of study participants reported they used food pantries, soup kitchens or other emergency food assistance in the last 12 months. This summed to 43% of respondents overall.

Food insecurity (not included as a work barrier). Depending on the site, adult food insecurity ranged in prevalence from 8% to 38%. Child food insecurity was found in 4% to 16% of households.

Crowding (not included as a work barrier). About one-third of study participants reported living in overcrowded housing (defined as the household having an average of either more than one person per room or more than two persons per bedroom). Rates of overcrowding ranged from 19% in Alameda County (sanction) to 24% in Alameda County (safety net) and San Francisco to 33% or more in the other sites.

Neighborhood problems (not included as a work barrier). At least 20% of mothers assessed as a “big” problem five neighborhood characteristics: (1) too many cars, (2) trash and litter, (3) people using or selling drugs, (4) no safe place for children to play, and (5) not safe to walk alone at night. Furthermore, a clear association was evident between mothers who reported no safe place for children to play and those who said they skipped work, school, or training in the last year because they were worried about their child's safety.

“These mothers live in a soup of problems . . . their willpower will not resolve most of them.”

A county welfare director

Entrenched Problems

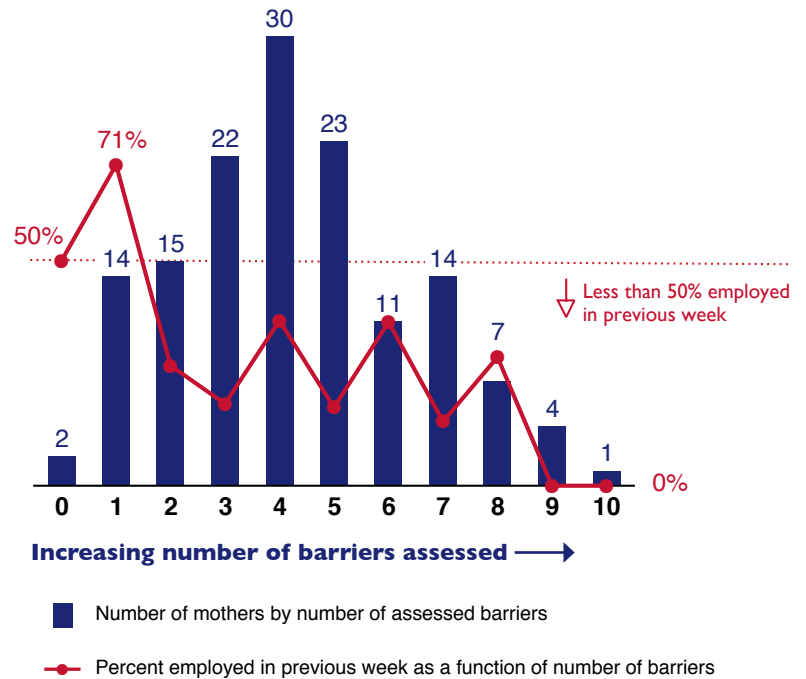
Many potential barriers were not tallied in this study yet contribute to the complexity of issues facing this population:

- Mothers associated with timed-out and sanctioned CalWORKs cases were not “young” (the mean age was 32 to 38 depending on the site), and their limited educational background and recent work experience suggest that substantial investment in human capital will be required before they can successfully enter – and remain in – the workforce and approach self-sufficiency.
- The majority of mothers surveyed also had relatively young children with the average age of the youngest child ranging from 6 to 9, depending on the site. Since these children will not “age out” of CalWORKs soon, the typical study family may remain a child-only case for some years. While there is much need for assistance for these families, there is also the opportunity for longer term intervention and greater impact.
- Many study participants reside in unsafe neighborhoods. Substantial parental attention is required to sustain children in these environments. Therefore, parental decisions not to engage in work but instead to remain available to children may constitute positive personal and social decisions unless there is another parent or adult caring for the children or responsible for them before and after school.

Multiple Barriers

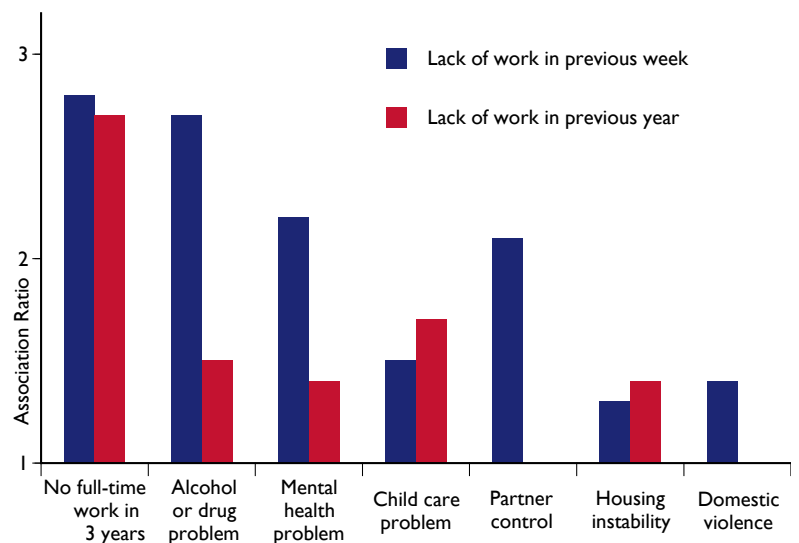
The vast majority (89%) of interviewed mothers in safety net and sanctioned child-only cases faced multiple barriers to employment (depicted by the columns at right). Only two mothers had no barriers. On average, study participants faced 4.3 barriers; among those parents who had almost no employment history, the average number of barriers increased to 5.1. Twelve mothers were assessed as having eight to ten barriers.

While more than two-thirds of mothers (71%) with only one barrier were currently employed, the study found that any more than one barrier substantially reduced the likelihood of getting and keeping a job (see red line at right). Among study participants with multiple barriers (two or more), only 24% had worked any hours during the previous week and only 39% had been employed at all in the past year.



High Impact Barriers

The most prevalent barriers are not necessarily those most strongly associated with lack of work. While transportation was a widespread problem, it was not as strongly associated with lack of employment as was the lack of full-time work experience in the past three years. The prevalence of alcohol and drug problems (11%) and partner control (8%) were relatively low, but their direct impacts were high. As the graph to the right displays, alcohol and drug problems were second only to lack of full-time work experience in strength of association with lack of current employment. Mothers who were not employed during the previous week were 2.8 times as likely not to have had full-time work within the previous three years and were 2.7 times as likely to have alcohol or drug problems as those who were employed. Alcohol and drug problems had much less association with lack of work in the previous year than in the previous week. Similarly, mental health problems and partner control, relatively important in their association with lack of work in the last week, are less important or unimportant for work in the last year.



Barriers most strongly associated with lack of employment in the previous week and previous year

County Variations

The array of barriers differed from county to county and from sanctioned to timed-out parents. While transportation was the most prevalent barrier in five of the six study sites, four different barriers were second most prevalent, depending on site.

KEY FINDINGS

Barriers to self-sufficiency span a range of conditions, some short-term in nature and others that are unlikely to change very quickly.

- Lack of full-time work experience is the top barrier to both current employment and employment over the past year.
- In addition, alcohol and drug problems, mental health problems, partner control, child care needs and domestic violence have a large association with lack of current employment by the mother in a child-only case.
- Longer term lack of employment is most highly associated with child care, alcohol and drug, and mental health problems and housing instability in addition to lack of full-time work experience.

Given what is known from previous studies, CalWORKs policies and practices are likely to achieve greater success by focusing on the remediation of these barriers as well as addressing the widespread need for transportation.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND STRATEGIES

Improving parental self-sufficiency

Since the circulation of findings from the second Child-only Study Report, several conversations have taken place among colleagues involved in public policy, county welfare administration, advocacy, and philanthropy about the implications of the research findings for federal, state, and local policy and practice. The following suggestions reflect an evolving perspective about what may be required to address the current limitations of the CalWORKs program in the effort to provide families with the resources, tools and incentives needed to become as self-reliant as possible and break the cycle of poverty.

Is partial disability assistance part of the solution?

While funding needs to be provided for early and continuing assessment of CalWORKs parents' challenges as well as advocacy programs that assist them with SSI applications and appeals, from a long-term, national perspective, it is possible that a partial disability program may be required for some parents. Currently, many individuals with apparently sustained and significant barriers to work do not qualify as disabled under SSI regulations. These parents are nonetheless ill-equipped to work either full-time or consistently enough to support themselves and their children. Those who fall short of qualifying for SSI benefits often qualify for CalWORKs and county General Assistance programs instead, which are not flexible enough or adequately resourced to serve families with children well. Consideration also needs to be given to timed-out caregivers/parents for whom inadequate access to self-sufficiency services resulted in their inability to overcome barriers to meeting the family's needs during their receipt of CalWORKs aid.

If, despite serious barriers to employment, caregivers fail to qualify for SSI or another existing program for family support, the creation of a new anti-poverty program that is not grounded solely in work activities may provide better outcomes for both adults and children. A partial disability program, such as a "Temporary and Partial Work Waiver" program, may constitute a critical step.

1. Identify resources and services that families need to surmount barriers and make these services accessible within counties.

- Connect parents in need to appropriate resources and services, including to transportation support services after CalWORKs time limits have been reached.
- Develop and/or access funding streams that can be used to remediate specific barriers such as education, housing, transportation, and others.
- Remove barriers to reinstating a timed-out parent/caregiver onto aid.
- Consider non-fiscal sanctions and options for remediating sanctions when barriers exist.
- Fund and provide access to child care for timed-out and sanctioned parents or other caregivers.
- Provide respite care for parents/caregivers with severe personal challenges.

2. Identify new or alternate funding to support services that cannot now be paid for with CalWORKs funding.

3. Increase use of exemptions and expanded reasons for exemption from welfare-to-work activities, when appropriate, for parents with barriers to employment.

- Review family barriers and needs at regular intervals, including long before sanctions are imposed, and conduct exit interviews well in advance of the five-year federal time limit.

- Amend CalWORKs exemptions to include documented barriers over which parents have limited control. Adapt exemption policies to accommodate parents with multiple barriers.

- Clarify, improve and apply exemption and good cause rules for parents/caregivers unable to obtain or maintain employment to reduce poverty and protect families with barriers.

- Revise policies to permit timed-out parents to resume receipt of aid under exemptions granted for family hardship to protect the welfare of children.

- Consider whether parents with multiple or severe health barriers are receiving appropriate disability accommodations in TANF, as provided for by the Americans with Disability Act (ADA).

- Revise policies to address the contradiction that a parent who is sanctioned, timed-out or found to be exempt, in most cases is ineligible for vocational training or other services, thereby substantially limiting the potential for her to move out of poverty.

4. Provide advocacy, case management, and wrap-around services for sanctioned and timed-out parents/caregivers in their efforts to secure financial and personal support to protect their families.

- Partner with community-based family strengthening organizations for services as needed.

5. Pursue changes to federal regulations to provide “credit” to California for its rules aimed at protecting children and to resolve conflicts with federal work participation rate requirements.

- California’s “safety net” to protect children results in the state doing poorly on federal work participa-

tion rates. The federal work participation rate does not count hours spent in many necessary activities on the road to self-sufficiency and does not give states credit for parents — for example, those with multiple barriers — who are partially participating in work activities. Correction to these problems could result in fewer families being sanctioned and in better long-term outcomes.

Meeting children’s needs

In addition to supports for parents, children in safety net and sanctioned families often require specialized assistance. The CalWORKs program currently lacks the direction or capacity to address these children’s needs. Some needs may be met outside CalWORKs by existing family services, county health and mental health programs, and other agencies or be met informally in the context of family life, child care, and school programs. Relying solely on these institutions is not realistic for families living in poverty conditions. Too often school districts, public agencies, and family child care programs are underfunded, teachers are overwhelmed, and too few special resource staff are available to advise and assist families in caring for their children.

Strengthening families

The underlying reality is that many families with entrenched problems cannot overcome poverty on their own. The technical and more global recommendations above constitute a piece of an anti-poverty program that would be a challenge to pursue in any environment, but they are especially difficult in California today, when every consideration for appropriate financial support must be weighed against the challenges of a major budget deficit.

To reach the combined objectives of policy change and program innovation, the state and counties will need to work both within and outside their jurisdictions as they determine the best ways to address and take ownership of these complex societal issues. Future research is needed to determine how children are faring in these impoverished families, to learn where they currently acquire support, and to ascertain what additional assistance they may require to thrive.

