

News Release
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Not Enough

Many Victims of Family Violence Not Getting the Help They Need From Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program, Survey Finds

Washington, D.C. – Bureaucratic black holes, indifferent or hostile staff members, inadequate benefits, and shortsighted procedures and policies are preventing many family violence victims from getting the resources they need to escape abuse. According to an unprecedented new national survey of service providers, problems like these plague the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, effectively stopping victims of abuse from accessing help when they need it most.

The report, [***Not Enough: What TANF Offers Family Violence Victims***](#), was produced by [Legal Momentum](#) and the [National Resource Center on Domestic Violence](#) (NRCDV). The survey on which it is based is a unique, comprehensive effort to understand when TANF successfully assists victims of family violence, and when the program falls short, leaving victims to fend for themselves. Some 600 staff members from domestic violence programs, legal aid and anti-poverty agencies who work with victims on TANF-related issues completed the survey.

Victims feel lost, confused, and frustrated with the system and it gets to a point where going back to the abuser is easier than dealing with the current system.

Conducted in late 2009, the survey finds that when TANF works well, it makes a significant difference in the lives of victims. But many victims of family violence encounter serious difficulties that undermine their efforts to access resources and forge a path to safety for themselves and their children.

In the survey, a mere 14 percent of respondents said that the TANF family violence responses work well in their states, and 43 percent said fewer than half of family violence victims were able to access TANF benefits. One in four respondents said “no” when asked if family violence information disclosed by victims was handled in an appropriate way.

“The results of this survey are deeply troubling,” said **NRCDV Director Anne Menard**. “Studies consistently show that a high proportion of women living in poverty also face abuse by an intimate partner or ex-partner. Being abused complicates their efforts to achieve economic stability, and poverty undermines their efforts to escape abuse. That’s why lawmakers put the Family Violence Option (FVO) in place, to help address the enormous challenges that impoverished victims of violence face. But even with the FVO, TANF is not working for many of the women who need it most. With the recession forcing so many families into poverty, we need to improve this policy now more than ever.”

“TANF is a lifeline for family violence victims, but it must be improved to be effective,” said **Legal Momentum staff attorney Timothy Casey**. “For too many victims, the TANF application process creates impossible barriers to assistance that prevent them from ever accessing the economic support they need. And for those who actually access benefits, too often the amount of aid that TANF provides is not enough to allow victims to meet their own and their children’s basic needs.”

U.S. Rep. Gwen Moore, Wisconsin, said, "This report shows us how women suffer under a broken system. A woman needs all the support she can get as she flees domestic violence, but instead she and her children face the heartbreaking possibility of being found by her abuser and the risk of becoming homeless. A safety net with holes like these is hardly safe. I am working on legislation to fill these holes and help give women a real support system."

“We absolutely must do better,” agreed **Legal Momentum President Irasema Garza**. “Congress and the Obama Administration must act now to improve TANF’s response to family violence victims. If we are serious about helping the most vulnerable victims of domestic and sexual violence, we simply must make this safety net work as it should.”

The survey also found that:

- Victims are not consistently and effectively screened or notified of family violence specific responses, waivers or protections. One respondent described the problem this way, “Oftentimes women are interviewed in public places like a counter, and also when the abuser is present, or not asked at all.”
- Respondents say the requirement that victims “prove” that they have experienced violence is a significant barrier. 61 percent say victims frequently don’t disclose violence because they fear it is unsafe to do so. 63 percent say victims don’t disclose violence because they see the TANF worker or system as unsympathetic. 73 percent say fear of child protection system involvement is a significant factor.
- Only 12 percent of respondents report that the child support enforcement cooperation exemption due to family violence is working well, while 29 percent said it is not working. One respondent reported, “Child support enforcement has helped in many ways with some family violence victims that we have served and with others it has created more barriers for victims to overcome.”
- Respondents were asked to rate eleven features of their state TANF family violence response policies. Referrals to local domestic violence programs received the highest ratings, with 70 percent of respondents saying it works well or works OK.
- At least 85 percent of respondents say that increasing employment services that lead to a living wage, increasing access to child care, and increasing training on domestic violence for TANF and child support enforcement workers would make TANF a more effective resource.

Victims can apply but access is very subjective. Unless a woman was recently beaten by her abuser, she is not seen as a victim of domestic violence [who] should be waived from the employment requirements and she is told she must complete 25 job searches. There is no consideration of the mental health aspect, ability to get a job, court dates, emotional confusion about the abuse and loss of being who she is. There will not be a waiver.

The full report, *Not Enough: What TANF Offers Family Violence Victims*, is available at <http://www.legalmomentum.org/assets/pdfs/not-enough-what-tanf-offers.pdf>.

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About Legal Momentum: Legal Momentum, the Women’s Legal Defense and Education Fund, is the nation’s oldest non-profit legal advocacy organization dedicated to advancing the rights of women and girls. www.legalmomentum.org

About the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (NRC DV): The NRC DV works to improve societal and community responses to domestic violence and, ultimately, prevent its occurrence through the provision of comprehensive technical assistance, training, and specialized resource materials and projects designed to enhance current intervention and prevention strategies. www.nrcdv.org