

FAMILY SUCCESS PROJECT

# TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE FOR TWO-PARENT FAMILIES IN TEXAS:

Reorienting TANF Toward Integral  
Human Development and Flourishing

WRITTEN BY Noah Torres and Hannah Bruck

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# TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE FOR TWO-PARENT FAMILIES IN TEXAS:

## Reorienting TANF Toward Integral Human Development and Flourishing

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### KEY POINTS

- **TANF was designed** to promote two-parent family stability, but current implementation in Texas diverts funds away from this core purpose.
- **Strong empirical evidence shows** that children in two-parent households experience better educational, economic, and behavioral outcomes.
- **Texas TANF administration** is fragmented across agencies, creating inefficiencies and misaligned incentives in service delivery.
- **Many TANF-funded programs** lack measurable impact on family formation, maternal well-being, or long-term self-sufficiency.
- **Reallocating TANF funds** toward evidence-based, family-centered programs can improve outcomes without increasing overall spending.

### INTRODUCTION

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is a federal block grant program that allots money to states to provide cash assistance and varied services to low-income families with minor children. TANF was established via the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) to replace an earlier federal program established in 1936, namely Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) Program (Weaver, 2014). According to PRWORA, four purposes define TANF, namely to:

- (1) provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives;
- (2) end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage;
- (3) prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies; and
- (4) encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families ([PRWORA 1996/110 Stat. 2113](#)).

Moreover, these purposes are undergirded by some essential propositions, *inter alia*, affirmed by Congress, including:

- (1) Marriage is the foundation of a successful society.
- (2) Marriage is an essential institution of a successful society which promotes the interests of children.

(3) Promotion of responsible fatherhood and motherhood is integral to successful child rearing and the well-being of children. ([PRWORA, 1996/110 Stat. 2113](#))

Considering these purposes and propositions, PRWORA orients the architecture, mechanisms, and functions of TANF to promote beneficiaries' transition (according to the best of their capacities) from dependency to self-sufficiency, responsibility, and personal fulfillment. To this end, PRWORA requires the federal government to appropriate \$16.5 billion for TANF per annum, which in turn is divided to fund state family assistance grants (SFAG) distributed to all fifty states, the District of Columbia, federally recognized Indian tribes, and several territories according to greatest of four numerical calculations that are pegged to AFDC values from the early 1990s ([PRWORA 1996/110 Stat. 2116](#)). SFAGs are augmented by other allocations of funds, including supplemental grants for population increases according to certain qualifying conditions. Moreover, PRWORA establishes a federal contingency fund for "needy states" according to disjunctive criteria concerning the total unemployment of a state or the number of individuals dependent on food stamps ([PRWORA, 1996/ 110 Stat. 2123](#)). Additionally, the receipt of SFAGs is conditioned on maintenance-of-effort (MOE) spending, as PRWORA indicates that if a state spends less of its own money on certain qualifying welfare programs than the required percentage of what it spent on those programs in 1994 according to AFDC and JOBS rules, the federal government reduces the state's SFAG by the amount the state failed to expend ([PRWORA 1996/110 Stat. 2143-45](#)). While PRWORA affords states considerable latitude to use their SFAGs and supplemental grants to develop and implement services and programs, it mandates that the use of these assistance grants be consistent with the four statutory purposes of TANF. Further, PRWORA conditions the receipt of benefits on mandatory work requirements that may be fulfilled via a beneficiary's engagement in various categories of employment, job search, job training, and education that meet certain statutorily defined conditions ([PRWORA 1996/110 Stat. 2133](#)).

Per a 2022 audit by the Public Consulting Group (PCG) on behalf of the State Auditor's Office, Texas's SFAG is \$484,652,105, the fourth largest in the nation, and is supplemented by an additional \$56 million drawn from the TANF Contingency Fund ([SAO, 2022, p. 1](#)). Notably, the amount Texas received from the contingency fund decreased in 2023 to \$48 million. Per structural rules enacted by the Texas Legislature, these funds are appropriated to four state agencies, namely the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) (11.1%), the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) (71%), the Texas Education Agency (TEA) (0.9%), and the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) (17%) ([SAO, 2022, p. 2](#)). HHSC is recognized by the federal government as the "cognizant agency" for TANF in Texas; however, it lacks authority or jurisdiction over the activities of these agencies ([SAO, 2022, p. 4](#)). In 2023, Texas' MOE spending amounted to approximately \$360 million ([Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2026](#)). As PRWORA permits states to carry over unspent block grant funds, Texas has accumulated approximately \$355 million in unspent funds as of 2023, equal to 73% of its block grant ([CBPP, 2026](#)).

Two concerning systemic phenomena characterize Texas' administration of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, namely the negligible percentage of all TANF money the state spends on Purpose 4 despite the existence of substantial roll-over monies and the critical importance of families for the well-being of both individuals and the state *and* the absence of any effective or meaningful *intra vires* governance by HHSC despite its *de iure* status of the cognizant agency overseeing the execution of TANF. These features of Texas' TANF administration are particularly troubling as they suggest both a possible underinvestment or failure to prioritize two-parent family structures via human services support and a governance vacuum between all four agencies wherein instead of operating as an effective first-among-equals, HHSC appears as one of

four concurrent jurisdictions on an equal plane, resulting in reporting failures, programmatic miscalculations, undefined inter-agency standards, and discordant inter-agency coordination.

The first systemic shortcoming of TANF administration in Texas is evinced by the state's spending trends. While Texas has a substantial sum of TANF dollars at its disposal, it has spent considerably dissimilar amounts on the four statutory purposes throughout the fiscal years of 2018 to 2021. This spending is illustrated below, wherein enumerations of purposes correspond to their ordering in PRWORA:

**Table 1**  
*Breakdown of TANF Spending in Texas, Fiscal Years 2018–2021*

|           | Expenditures by Purpose w/o MOE | Expenditures by Purpose w/ MOE |
|-----------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Purpose   | Percentage Spent                | Percentage Spent               |
| Purpose 1 | 58.9%                           | 26.5%                          |
| Purpose 2 | 26.4%                           | 11.9%                          |
| Purpose 3 | 12.4%                           | 60.5%                          |
| Purpose 4 | 2.3%                            | 1.1%                           |

**Note.** Data are from SAO (2022, p. 34).

Overwhelmingly, money spent by the state of Texas on the four purposes of TANF is directed to Purpose 1 and Purpose 3. Federal dollars are principally utilized to accomplish Purpose 1, while state MOE dollars are principally utilized to accomplish Purpose 3, as suggested by the quantitatively significant percentage jump of Purpose 3 spending when MOE spending is included in the analysis. Notwithstanding the inclusion of MOE spending, Purpose 4 spending is negligible.

Data aggregated by the Office of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) for fiscal year 2024 further reveal the character of Texas's TANF spending, with or without Maintenance of Effort funds, relative to other states. The table below shows state spending on ACF-196R, Line 19, "Fatherhood and Two-Parent Family Formation and Maintenance". Per SAO (2022, p. 43), "expenditures for Purpose 4 programs need to be reported on Line 19: Fatherhood and Two-Parent Family Formation and Maintenance Program." The ACF defines the Line 19 item as:

Programs that aim to promote responsible fatherhood and/or encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. For examples, activities within these programs may include marriage education, marriage and relationship skills, fatherhood skills programs, parent skills workshops, public advertising campaigns on the value of marriage and responsible fatherhood, education regarding how to control aggressive behavior, financial planning seminars, and divorce education and reduction programs (Office of the Administration for Children & Families, 2026)

**Table 2**

*Breakdown of TANF Purpose 4 Self-Reported Spending by State via ACR-196R Line 19 “Fatherhood and Two-Parent Family Formation and Maintenance”, Fiscal Year 2024*

|                      | Block Grant Funds<br>(without MOE) |                                    | MOE Funds Only |                                  | Combined Federal & MOE Funds |                              |
|----------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| State                | Amount                             | % of Total<br>Block Grant<br>Funds | Amount         | % of Total<br>State MOE<br>Funds | Amount                       | % of Total<br>Combined Funds |
| Alabama              | \$6,208,258                        | 7.0%                               | –              | –                                | \$6,208,258                  | 3.0%                         |
| Alaska               | –                                  | –                                  | –              | –                                | –                            | –                            |
| Arizona              | –                                  | –                                  | –              | –                                | –                            | –                            |
| Arkansas             | \$2,740,068                        | 2.9%                               | –              | –                                | \$2,740,068                  | 2.1%                         |
| California           | –                                  | –                                  | \$2,004,062    | <0.1%                            | \$2,004,062                  | <0.1%                        |
| Colorado             | \$696,246                          | 0.4%                               | –              | –                                | \$696,246                    | 0.1%                         |
| Connecticut          | \$17,960,363                       | 7.5%                               | \$285,002      | 0.1%                             | \$18,245,365                 | 3.4%                         |
| Delaware             | –                                  | –                                  | –              | –                                | –                            | –                            |
| District of Columbia | –                                  | –                                  | –              | –                                | –                            | –                            |
| Florida              | –                                  | –                                  | \$4,389,611    | 0.9%                             | \$4,389,611                  | 0.5%                         |
| Georgia              | –                                  | –                                  | –              | –                                | –                            | –                            |
| Hawaii               | –                                  | –                                  | –              | –                                | –                            | –                            |
| Idaho                | –                                  | –                                  | –              | –                                | –                            | –                            |
| Illinois             | –                                  | –                                  | –              | –                                | –                            | –                            |
| Indiana              | \$16,766,521                       | 14.7%                              | –              | –                                | \$16,766,521                 | 7.1%                         |
| Iowa                 | \$3,283                            | <0.1%                              | –              | –                                | \$3,283                      | <0.1%                        |
| Kansas               | \$2,702,310                        | 3.1%                               | –              | –                                | \$2,702,310                  | 1.7%                         |
| Kentucky             | –                                  | –                                  | \$544,241      | 0.7%                             | \$544,241                    | 0.2%                         |
| Louisiana            | \$1,193,451                        | 0.7%                               | –              | –                                | \$1,193,451                  | 0.3%                         |
| Maine                | –                                  | –                                  | –              | –                                | –                            | –                            |
| Maryland             | \$1,003,590                        | 0.6%                               | –              | –                                | \$1,003,590                  | 0.1%                         |
| Massachusetts        | –                                  | –                                  | –              | –                                | –                            | –                            |
| Michigan             | –                                  | –                                  | –              | –                                | –                            | –                            |
| Minnesota            | –                                  | –                                  | –              | –                                | –                            | –                            |
| Mississippi          | \$38,236,512                       | 64.5%                              | –              | –                                | \$38,236,512                 | 47.2%                        |
| Missouri             | \$824,103                          | 0.4%                               | \$36,802,674   | 18.4%                            | \$37,626,777                 | 9.5%                         |
| Montana              | –                                  | –                                  | –              | –                                | –                            | –                            |
| Nebraska             | \$3,687,002                        | 6.9%                               | –              | –                                | \$3,687,002                  | 3.9%                         |
| Nevada               | –                                  | –                                  | –              | –                                | –                            | –                            |
| New Hampshire        | –                                  | –                                  | –              | –                                | –                            | –                            |
| New Jersey           | \$7,359,998                        | 2.2%                               | –              | –                                | \$7,359,998                  | 0.4%                         |
| New Mexico           | \$500,000                          | 0.7%                               | –              | –                                | \$500,000                    | 0.2%                         |
| New York             | \$155,938                          | <0.1%                              | –              | –                                | \$155,938                    | <0.1%                        |
| North Carolina       | \$94,465                           | <0.1%                              | –              | –                                | \$94,465                     | <0.1%                        |

|                   |                      |             |                     |             |                      |             |
|-------------------|----------------------|-------------|---------------------|-------------|----------------------|-------------|
| North Dakota      | –                    | –           | –                   | –           | –                    | –           |
| Ohio              | \$7,160,725          | 1.1%        | \$5,995,304         | 1.2%        | \$13,156,029         | 1.1%        |
| Oklahoma          | \$28,929,398         | 15.9%       | –                   | –           | \$28,929,398         | 12.1%       |
| Oregon            | –                    | –           | –                   | –           | –                    | –           |
| Pennsylvania      | \$225,964            | 0.1%        | –                   | –           | \$225,964            | <0.1%       |
| Rhode Island      | –                    | –           | –                   | –           | –                    | –           |
| South Carolina    | \$2,875,269          | 2.5%        | –                   | –           | \$2,875,269          | 1.7%        |
| South Dakota      | –                    | –           | –                   | –           | –                    | –           |
| Tennessee         | –                    | –           | –                   | –           | –                    | –           |
| Texas             | –                    | –           | –                   | –           | –                    | –           |
| Utah              | \$566,747            | 1.1%        | –                   | –           | \$566,747            | 0.7%        |
| Vermont           | –                    | –           | –                   | –           | –                    | –           |
| Virginia          | –                    | –           | –                   | –           | –                    | –           |
| Washington        | –                    | –           | –                   | –           | –                    | –           |
| West Virginia     | –                    | –           | –                   | –           | –                    | –           |
| Wisconsin         | –                    | –           | \$1,923,815         | 0.7%        | \$1,923,815          | 0.4%        |
| Wyoming           | –                    | –           | –                   | –           | –                    | –           |
| <b>U.S. TOTAL</b> | <b>\$139,890,213</b> | <b>1.0%</b> | <b>\$51,944,708</b> | <b>0.3%</b> | <b>\$191,834,922</b> | <b>0.5%</b> |

**Note.** Data are from ACF FY 2024 (2026, tab. c.1, tab. c.2, tab b.). Data represent Purpose 4 spending, represented by ACF-196R Line 19, “Fatherhood and Two-Parent Family Formation and Maintenance Programs.” Each “% of Total” = that state’s “Fatherhood and Two-Parent” spending divided by its total TANF expenditures for the same funding stream. States not reporting expenditures for ACF-196R Line 19 have blank fields.

Two principal findings may be inferred from the table above. First, states allocate varying amounts of their block grant or MOE funds to Purpose 4. For example, Mississippi reports that the total of its approximate Purpose 4 spending, \$38.2M, is exclusively from block grant funding and is 47.2% of its total TANF expenditures. Missouri, on the other hand, reports that most of its Purpose 4 spending is from MOE funding (\$36.8M), which represents almost all of its total \$37.2M Purpose 4 expenditures. Second, several states, namely Mississippi, Missouri, Oklahoma, Connecticut, and Indiana, spend significantly greater percentage amounts of their TANF funding toward Purpose 4 expenditures than Texas.

Of note is the conspicuous absence of approximate Purpose 4 spending for several states, including Texas. The absence of dollar amounts should not necessarily be construed to indicate that these states do not direct *any* monies toward the substantive goals that correspond to Purpose 4. Some states may utilize contingency or SFAG funding to fulfill Purpose 4 spending. Additionally, states may fund Purpose 4 programs via Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) grants, which are not represented in ACF-196R reporting. Curiously, while the SAO (2022) audit indicates that certain programs in Texas, such as the Healthy Marriages Program, Relative and Other Designated Caregiver Program (albeit incorrectly, as this is a Line 18 item), and Alternatives to Abortion (also incorrectly, as this is a Line 18 item), were reported as Line 19 items for the fiscal years 2018–2021, these programs do not appear in Line 19 reporting for fiscal year 2024. With respect to the Healthy Marriages Program, also known as Twogether in Texas, the Texas Health and Human Services Commission indicates that in FY 2024, it was funded by \$239,542 from federal TANF block grant dollars (Texas Health and Human Services Commission, 2024). It is unknown why this spending is not reflected in ACF documentation. As for the Relative and Other Designated Caregiver Program, it is possible that following the

audit, the state may have initiated proper categorization as a Line 18 program. The Alternatives to Abortion program, now known as Thriving Texas Families, no longer receives funding via TANF. Since fiscal year 2022, Thriving Texas Families receives funding via the General Revenue ([Texas Health and Human Services, 2025](#)). The latest ACF financial report reflecting the use of TANF dollars for Line 19 programs in Texas is from fiscal year 2020, which indicates the state's spending on Line 19 programs amounted to \$9,654,369, exclusively drawn from federal block grant dollars ([Office of the Administration for Children & Families, 2021](#)).

The second systemic fault in TANF administration in the state, namely the nonfeasance of HHSC to function as an effective coordinating agency, is suggested by the inter-agency reporting failures, lacunae in standardized procedures, the absence of a unified vision of TANF across all four agencies, and inconsistent and erroneous program outcomes. Indeed, while HHSC did not directly or intentionally cause these problems, six specific failures suggest cascading effects from the absence of firm governance. These six faults include the following:

**Table 3**  
*Six Indicators of Cascading Effects of HHSC Nonfeasance*

| Indicator                                                                         | Note                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ACF-196R Reporting                                                                | The Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families mandates financial reporting of TANF expenditures. DFPS, TWC, and TEA failed to report accurate spending that conflicted with previous expense reports and indicated that HHSC had provided incorrect guidance. HHSC failed to notify agencies that they report expenditures for prior Grant Years to pay for current year expenditures. ACF-196R report from agencies did not match the ACF-19R report from HHSC.                    |
| DFPS Contingency Fund Expenditure Reporting ( <a href="#">SAO, 2022, p. 105</a> ) | DFPS failed to report contingency fund expenditures on its ACF-196R to HHSC. DFPS failed to document that contingency funds were spent appropriately. HHSC may have failed to inform DFPS of its contingency fund allocation, how to request access to funds, or to report funds accurately.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Inconsistent and Variable Rule Knowledge ( <a href="#">SAO 2022, p. 34</a> )      | None of the four agencies provide consistent training or monitoring for managing TANF expenses. Agency and program staff "demonstrated varying levels of knowledge" on permissible uses of TANF funds and what expenses may count toward MOE spending.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Healthy Marriage Development Program Allocation                                   | HHSC failed to allocate the mandatory minimum of 1% of TANF funds to the Healthy Marriage Development Program according to Texas Human Resources Code 31.018. Instead of allotting the minimum \$4,846,521.05, HHSC allotted \$89,911. The Healthy Marriages Program did not provide any type of statutorily-defined service or benefit.                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Alternatives to Abortion (A2A) Shortcomings                                       | A2A expenditures were incorrectly reported on the ACF-196R, as HHSC miscategorized the program as fulfilling Purpose 4. HHSC failed to establish income eligibility for needy families participating in A2A. HHSC failed to treat the ongoing provision of infant formula as a type of assistance, and would thus be considered part of Purpose 1. HHSC failed to ensure that A2A understood notification requirements, resulting in A2A failing to notify providers that they were receiving TANF funds (PCG, 2022, p. 78) |
| Incoherent Vision                                                                 | No agency articulated a coherent vision for the TANF program. Since HHSC is the only cognizant agency in Texas, it is the agency responsible for architectonic vision-casting.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |

**Note.** Information sourced from SAO ([2022](#)).

Together, underinvestment in Purpose 4 and apparent nonfeasance by HHSC inhibit Texas from fully realizing the purposes of TANF and, thus, the ultimate moral aims that correspond to the work of human services such as TANF, namely, the facilitation of the integral development and flourishing of every beneficiary. While a term not featured in statute, integral human development is a sociological term that describes both the individual's longitudinal and dynamic maturation toward multidimensional fulfillment of his whole person and the process by which policies can support this type of development. Precisely, integral development is the promotion of the "good of every person and of the whole person," wherein the good of the person is achieved not merely by "economic growth or monetary income," but rather by the fulfillment of needs in realms relating to "health, learning, emotional, social and political interaction, spiritual life, creativity, and self-determination" (Keleher, 2018, p. 33).

Indeed, while TANF provides assistance that does not necessarily correspond directly and principally to each of these realms, TANF nevertheless promotes a stable vision of life in a family in which these realms might be cultivated by persons both as individuals and as members of the ongoing family. Moreover, TANF explicitly seeks to aid individuals in departing from dependence, corresponding to an essential principle of integral development: that each person, to the best of his abilities, is the architect and director of his development, and that he finds fulfillment and flourishing in this role. Moreover, human flourishing describes the fulfillment of each and every person's needs and desires across the various developmental realms and domains, and not merely their attainment of material satisfaction. Consequently, the work of the four agencies responsible for TANF in Texas represents much more than benefit allocation and recipients represent much more than mere points in a dataset; rather, the allocation of benefits represents a critical effort in enabling individuals to function as the principal directors of their flourishing and beneficiaries represent an individual with infinite and abiding dignity who necessarily desires for full participation in society and contribution to its common good as an individual and as a member of a family. The family is central to facilitating integral development and human flourishing, particularly for children, who experience the most favorable outcomes across several domains when raised in a stable, two-parent household (Wilcox et al., 2024; Kearney, 2023). Therefore, as TANF plays a critical role in elevating the human person into a fuller realization of their dignity and offers benefits that set a person on a path toward integral development and flourishing, the extant problems in contemporary TANF administration in Texas and the unfortunate underinvestment in the promotion and maintenance of two-parent families prevents Texas from realizing the real and substantive change that TANF can offer families who need assistance the most.

To rectify these problems, the Texas Legislature ought to move to accomplish several distinct goals. First, all four agencies responsible for administering TANF in Texas—and particularly HHSC, the federally recognized TANF coordinating agency—ought to be required to develop coherent and cogent guidelines that govern and direct their respective functions. Second, the Legislature ought to develop robust and meaningful programs that correspond to Purpose 4 of TANF, which is presently unrepresented in Texas TANF expenditures. Finally, the Legislature ought to develop mechanisms that enable long-term tracking of outcomes of TANF recipients, which would yield data useful for improving TANF programs as means for promoting the integral development of recipients.

To the end of supporting this proposal, this paper will provide greater clarity regarding Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the importance of the family unit in supporting the integral development and flourishing of individuals, and the contemporary problems besetting the administration of TANF in Texas. The first chapter

will consider the history of TANF in the United States. In the second chapter, the intent, purpose, and goals of TANF will be considered, with particular attention to the proximate end of promoting stable and healthy two-parent households and the remote end of facilitating integral development and human flourishing. The third chapter will then consider the empirical benefits of stable family structures for individual flourishing, as well as the potential benefits that certain human service interventions might provide to the individual within a family unit. The fourth chapter will then explore the contemporary state of TANF administration across HHSC, DFPS, TEA, and TWC, with particular attention given to the findings of the 2022 audit. The fifth chapter will propose specific policy proposals to improve the administration of TANF, with particular attention to HHSC and the condition of needy families in Texas. Finally, this paper will conclude with summative remarks, as well as reflections on the role of human services in supporting the flourishing of Texans.

## **FROM AFDC TO TANF: THE TRANSFORMATION OF FAMILY ASSISTANCE IN THE UNITED STATES**

An adequate history of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and the type of aid it dispenses, despite its recent inception relative to other welfare programs in the United States, would be much longer than required for this paper. Indeed, even the history of the essential principles of welfare administration characterizing TANF extend as far back as the medieval and early modern period, wherein church and state bureaucracies, via the canon, civil, and common law, not only developed clear antecedents to means-tests and varying modes of assistance and service delivery still featured in modern welfare systems, but also solidified in poor law jurisprudence that aid to qualifying individuals was to support their flourishing as either a matter of charity or justice.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as interesting as that long history of welfare in American and broader contexts may be, this chapter will provide only a brief contextual illustration of TANF as the product of evolving, late-twentieth-century theories and perspectives about welfare that were increasingly discordant with prior mid-twentieth-century assumptions that informed the creation of New Deal-era programs and statutes (Caputo, 2015).

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families federal block grant program was a creature of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, itself a creature of efforts to reconfigure and restructure certain features of the welfare architecture previously designed by the Social Security Act of 1935. Specifically, TANF was designed to replace Aid to Families with Dependent Children (previously, Aid to Dependent Children), a federally mandated program that provided monthly cash assistance to families with needy children, meaning those children “deprived of parental support or care because their father or mother is absent from the home, continuously, is incapacitated, is deceased, or is unemployed,” (Page & Lerner, 1997). Cash assistance from AFDC was provided via states, which were given the latitude to set eligibility standards, yet were required to distribute assistance to all eligible individuals (Teles, 1996). Alongside cash assistance, AFDC provided other benefits, including Medicaid, childcare assistance, food stamps, and subsidized housing (Page & Lerner, 1997). Notably, at its inception, AFDC (then ADC) was intended only for widows and, eventually, certain categories of single mothers, yet when the Social Security Act was amended in 1962, assistance was expanded to include families with unemployed fathers. This change occurred in part to invalidate certain baroque state-specific conditions on the receipt of welfare, such as “man-in-house” rules (wherein receipt of welfare was prohibited if a man resided in the recipient’s home) and to resolve the concern that AFDC was providing welfare only to “broken families while denying it to those that are intact,” and thereby creating “an incentive for family dissolution” (Teles, 1996, p. 39). Because of the changes to AFDC following amendments

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<sup>1</sup> For the interested reader in the history of welfare programs, see Jutte, R. (1994) *Poverty and deviance in early modern Europe*. Cambridge University Press. For an early modern commentary on contemporary welfare programs and reform, see de Soto, D. (1545/2022) *Deliberation on the cause of the poor* (W. Decock, ed.; J. Possemiers, J. Lasquety-Reyes, trans.). CLP Academic.

to the Social Security Act, AFDC witnessed a continuous, meteoric rise of recipients, peaking in 1973 with 80% of poor children in the United States receiving benefits ([Page & Larner, 1997](#)).

Coupled with the increase of AFDC beneficiaries throughout the 1960s and early 1970s was an increase in public opinion that the government was spending too much on welfare, and a decrease in public opinion that the government ought to spend more. Between 1961 and 1973, the proportion of Americans supporting increased welfare expenditures dropped from more than 60% to approximately 20% (Teles, 1996, p. 43). Moreover, in a 1986 study, only 15.5% of respondents believed that AFDC expenditures should be decreased, with 32.6% believing it ought to be increased (Teles, 1996, p. 43). These changes in public attitudes toward welfare and AFDC anticipate the eventual push to replace AFDC in the 1990s, a period wherein opposition to New Deal-era welfare was at its zenith. As for the causes of these shifts in sentiment, there are two possible explanations: the idiosyncratic and prominent perspectives on poverty that dominated the 1960s, and evolving images of the welfare recipient. As for the former, 1960s images of poverty were defined by the short-lived welfare rights movement, which envisioned the federal government guaranteeing a basic minimum standard of living and placing all welfare administration under federal, not state, control (Davis, 1995). The intensity of the welfare rights movement during the 1960s, which in part facilitated the expansion of eligibility for programs like AFDC, ultimately bifurcated opinion into two cadres. The first cadre, which may have influenced public opinion against New Deal-era welfare reform, held that “no control was being exercised over who was on the rolls and what they were doing once on them,” a conclusion drawn from the flurry of eligibility expansions won in part through welfare rights litigation (Teles, 1996, p. 45). The second cadre—and apparently less popular opinion, if Teles’ analyses of public sentiments are correct—was that of welfare rights activists who had a fraught relationship with AFDC, believing on one hand that AFDC had punitive and discriminatory rules that reflected a false image of mothers on AFDC as “immoral...stupid and incompetent,” yet on the other hand that expanded AFDC benefits were necessary to resolve the economic question facing African-Americans, who were overrepresented on AFDC rolls for much of its existence (Davis, 1995, p. 144, p. 8; Quadagno, 1996). Eventually, in an effort to resolve tensions surrounding welfare, in 1969, President Richard Nixon proposed to end the AFDC and replace it with the Family Assistance Plan (FAP), which would have provided a \$1,600 guaranteed annual income for a family of four, subject to means tests and work requirements, that would be distributed by the federal government (Davis, 1995, p. 138). Nixon’s FAP proposal was poorly received by some conservatives and liberals alike, with the former group contending that it would be a “drain on the treasury,” and the latter group opposing FAP work requirements and the relatively small size of the individual supplement ([McNown, 1973, p. 59](#)). Moreover, FAP drew the ire of intransigent members of the welfare rights movement. While FAP would have introduced a welfare structure “significantly more favorable to generous welfare payments than the AFDC structure,” especially in the long-run, FAP centralized authority over benefit levels in the federal government and would have led to decreases in benefits in high-paying states, leading to welfare rights activists’ opposition (Teles, 1996, p. 92). Ultimately, FAP failed, in part due to its idiosyncratic character and the perception among its opponents that it was chimerical, seeking to “dramatically expand the federal government’s direct spending on the poor,” while simultaneously organizing “redistribution through the principle of work” (Teles, 1996, p. 94).

Despite public frustration with welfare and Nixon’s efforts to address a range of systemic issues plaguing AFDC, reform of AFDC proved elusive throughout much of the 1970s. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter similarly failed to win support for his own attempt at AFDC reform via the Program for Better Jobs and Income (Teles, 1996, p. 95). Yet, in 1988, Congress passed the Family Support Act (FSA), which introduced both conceptual reframing of welfare and institutional reforms of AFDC. As for reframing or a conceptual rearticulation, the

Family Support Act of 1988 emphasizes that AFDC existed not to “furnish long-term income support but rather to provide short-term assistance to enable recipients to manage on their own,” ([Institute for Research on Poverty, n.d., p. 15](#)). As for major elements of reform, FSA introduced seismic changes relating to child support, work requirements, and benefits. With respect to child support, FSA required that “child support orders must provide for the support to be collected by withholding wages,” and that states must establish procedures for setting child support awards ([Bentsen, 1990, p. 137](#)). Additionally, the FSA required that every state establish a Job Opportunities and Basic Skills program to make available to AFDC recipients a wide array of educational, training, and job-related activities. Notably, under FSA, if a participant in AFDC had a child, they were required to participate in a JOBS program unless excused due to some incapacity ([Institute for Research on Poverty, n.d., p. 17](#)).

The changes implemented by FSA reflected not only a new consensus between conservatives and liberals regarding welfare but also evolving public opinion regarding welfare expenditures and welfare recipients. As for public opinion, strident opposition toward welfare expansion slightly decreased in the early 1980s, with only 44% of Americans believing that welfare spending was “too much,” a change inspired in part by the experience of the 1981–1982 recession (Teles, 1996, p. 45). Moreover, a 1987 study found that 89% of Americans agreed that work was “either essential or very important to getting ahead” (Teles, 1996, p. 53). As for the political consensus, it may be defined by five principal themes, namely “responsibility, work, family, education, and state discretion” ([Handler, 1987, p. 506](#)). Despite past disagreements between liberals and conservatives on these themes throughout the 1960s and 1970s—particularly work requirements—the FSA arose from an awareness of several acute national problems, namely the “rise of the female-headed household and the incidence of poverty among this group,” as well as the “growing perception that large segments of our population are trapped in poverty-stricken, crime- and drug-ridden ghettos and that children growing up in the circumstances have at best, only a marginal chance of a decent, productive life” ([Handler, 1987, p. 466](#)). Moreover, the FSA represented a concerted effort to meaningfully enforce extant work requirements, which had been “rarely enforced” since 1967 (Ziliak, 2016, p. 307). This consensus was in part the consequence of the collapse of a viable and influential welfare rights intellectual movement, which had previously stimulated liberal attitudes toward welfare in the 1960s and 1970s; in the absence of these intellectual influences, Republican-supported centrist theories of welfare that emphasized work requirements and family stability while nevertheless seeking to resolve systemic causes of poverty eventually enthralled Democrats (Teles, 1996, pp. 148–150).

By the early 1990s, however, this consensus began to show its cracks, with optimism about FSA decreasing among conservatives, who increasingly feared that AFDC did little to aid the children of single mothers and fostered “illegitimacy and its attendant social pathologies” (Teles, 1996, p. 151). Moreover, in the period immediately following the passage of the FSA, AFDC caseloads surged, prompting the authorization of waivers for 12 states ([Ziliak et al., 2000](#)). Consequently, an increasing number of conservatives insisted on abolishing welfare in its present form. Public opinion during this period was marked by increased suspicion of welfare spending, with 56.6% of Americans in 1993 expressing opposition to increased spending while affirming a commitment to supporting the poor, provided they engaged in meaningful work and received only time-limited assistance (Teles, 1996, p. 45). Aware of increasing unpopularity surrounding AFDC, President Bill Clinton promised in his 1992 campaign to “end welfare as we know it,” by both instituting a more robust system conducive to beneficiary independence and by generously granting waivers to states to experiment with the organization and delivery of welfare (Weaver, 2014, p. 360; Teles, 1996).

By 1996, President Clinton and Congress accomplished their mission of ending the previous welfare regime, establishing Temporary Assistance for Needy Families via the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, representing a replacement of “social welfare with a work-based social policy” (Dello Buono, 2018, p. 29). Since the authorizing legislation for TANF expired in 2002, PRWORA has been followed by routine short-term funding extensions and modifications to the program’s character and operation. Ziliak (2016) identified the major pieces of legislation affecting TANF from 1996 to 2016, listed below; additional germane legislation in subsequent years is also identified. Unremarkable short-term funding-extension legislation is not included.

**Table 4**

*Notable Legislation Relating to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, 1996–2026*

| Date               | Legislation                                                                            | Notes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| August 22, 1996    | Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act                        | Established Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, eliminated AFDC.                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| August 5, 1997     | Balanced Budget Act of 1997                                                            | Set maximum allowable TANF transfer to Title XX services at 10% of block grant.<br>Established Welfare-to-Work (WTW) program within TANF.                                                                                                                              |
| November 19, 1997  | Adoption and Safe Families Act                                                         | Reduced contingency fund appropriations by \$40 million.                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| June 9, 1998       | Transportation Act for the 21st Century                                                | Permitted the use of federal TANF funds to be used as matching funds for reverse commuter grants.                                                                                                                                                                      |
| November 29, 1999  | Consolidated Appropriations Act for 2000                                               | Broadened WTW eligibility.<br>Expanded WTW activities to include job training.                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| March 9, 2002      | Job Creation and Worker Assistance Act                                                 | Extended supplemental grants and contingency funds, as PRWORA authorized TANF through 2002.                                                                                                                                                                            |
| February 8, 2006   | Deficit Reduction Act                                                                  | Extended TANF grants through 2010.<br>Established competitive grants within TANF for healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood initiatives.<br>Required HHS to develop statutory definitions for activities contributing to TANF work participation.                 |
| February 17, 2009  | American Recovery and Reinvestment Act                                                 | Established \$5B Emergency Contingency Fund to reimburse states for costs associated with the Great Recession.                                                                                                                                                         |
| December 8, 2010   | Claims Resolution Act of 2010                                                          | Extended funding through FY2011.<br>Reduced contingency fund funding.<br>Strengthened additional reporting on work activities and TANF expenditures.                                                                                                                   |
| September 30, 2011 | Short-Term TANF Extension Act                                                          | Extended funding for three months and did not provide funding for supplemental grants.                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| February 22, 2012  | Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act of 2012                                   | Extended TANF funding through FY2012.<br>Prevented EBT access to TANF funds at liquor stores, casinos, and strip clubs.<br>Required states to prohibit access to TANF cash at ATMs in prohibited establishments.<br>Imposed data interoperability rules for TANF data. |
| May 5, 2017        | Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2017 ( <a href="#">CRS</a> , <a href="#">2017</a> ) | Extended funding through FY2018.<br>Basic block grant funding reduced by 0.33% to support TANF research.<br>Developed the “What Works Clearinghouse” database to list projects that were effective in moving benefits to work.                                         |

|                |                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|----------------|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| March 11, 2021 | American Rescue Plan Act of 2021               | Established \$1bn Pandemic Emergency Assistance Fund (PEAF) for states, D.C., and tribes operating a TANF program, as well as all five U.S. territories. PEAF benefits required to be non-recurrent and short term and are limited to benefits that correspond to benefits that may be reported according to line 15 of the ACF-196R TANF reporting form.                                                                                                     |
| June 3, 2023   | Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023 (Falk, 2026) | Established that states would be given credit for “caseload reduction” for FY2015 forward. Prohibited states from counting families who received only trivial benefits under \$35 funded with MOE from non-TANF programs toward work requirements. Mandated employment outcome reporting. Permitted HHS to conduct pilot programs in up to five states (AZ, IA, NE, OH, VA) to test new performance systems relating to TANF adult recipient work activities. |

Moreover, at the time of PRWORA’s enactment, several major differences existed between the extinguished AFDC program and TANF. These differences capture the essential characteristics of both AFDC and TANF. Notable distinctions identified by Falk (2026) and Ziliak (2016, pp. 309–312) are identified below:

**Table 5**  
*Notable Distinctions between Aid for Families with Dependent Children and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families*

| Subject Matter              | AFDC                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | TANF                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Statutory Purpose           | To encourage the care of children in their own home or the homes of relatives by enabling states to furnish assistance and other services to needy children and their parents or guardians. Aid parents or guardians in attaining the capability for maximum support. | Via block grants to states, enable states to conduct a program that achieves the following four purposes: 1) provide assistance to needy families so that children can be cared for in their own homes or homes of relatives, 2) end dependence of needy parents on government benefits, 3) reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancies and births, 4) promote the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. |
| Funding                     | No federal dollar limit on funding for AFDC and Emergency Assistance. JOBS funding was limited by both federal and state governments. Funding permanently authorized.                                                                                                 | Block grant provided to each state based on federal share of expenditures in AFDC & related programs in the early 1990s. Supplemental grants provided to 17 states with low historic AFDC spending. Additional grants via contingency fund. Bonus to states for work-related performance.                                                                                                                  |
| State Funding               | State funds were required to finance a share of expenditures.                                                                                                                                                                                                         | States required to expend a minimum MOE amount, at least 75% of what they spent in 1994 on TANF-eligible families and activities conducive to the ends of TANF.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Use of Funds                | Reimbursed expenditures were for cash expenditures.                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | TANF funds may be used for activities that may be “reasonably calculated” to meet TANF goals.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Individual Entitlement      | Individuals denied AFDC aid could be granted an opportunity for an appeal via a fair hearing.                                                                                                                                                                         | TANF is not an entitlement.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Time Limit                  | No time-limited benefits.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Federal TANF dollars may not be used to aid a family whose head of household has received TANF for 60 months. Hardship extensions are possible. Families without heads of household receiving benefits do not have months counted to the time limit.                                                                                                                                                       |
| Other Cash Assistance Rules | Federal law established a gross income limit (185% of the state-determined need standard), an asset test (no more than \$1,000 in countable assets), and rules for how states count types of income.                                                                  | States determine income eligibility thresholds and benefit amounts.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |

|                                                        |                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Work Performance Measures                              | Required that a percentage of a state's caseload that was not working full-time must be engaged in JOBS program activities. | Requires a percentage of a state's caseload to be engaged in work or job preparation activities. Education may be counted in certain circumstances. States are given credit toward their work standard for the reduction of the number of families receiving assistance not attributable to policy changes. |
| Individual Work Requirements                           | Nonexempt adults are required to participate in JOBS.                                                                       | States establish work requirements.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Satisfactory Work Activities                           | Defined by the JOBS program.                                                                                                | Defined by the state.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Sanctions on Noncompliant but Work-Capable Individuals | Noncompliant recipients were removed from the family's consideration of need.                                               | States imposed sanctions that are either a pro rata reduction or termination of benefits.                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Childcare                                              | Guaranteed for all JOBS participants.                                                                                       | No guarantee of childcare, but states have funds to support childcare.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Child Support                                          | States are required to allow the first \$50 of child support to not reduce the benefit.                                     | No provision.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |

As the tabulated information suggests, TANF represents a significant departure from AFDC, perhaps best embodied in the transition from an entitlement principally focused on alleviating child poverty to a discretionary allocation centered on the holistic flourishing of the family.

## INTEGRAL DEVELOPMENT AND HUMAN FLOURISHING: CONCEPTUALIZING THE ULTIMATE AIM OF TANF

Four explicit purposes define Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. However, when considered together, these purposes evince a commitment to an underlying, normative vision concerning the well-being of the individual and the family unit. Recall that the four purposes of TANF are to provide assistance to needy families, extinguish welfare dependence via job preparation and meaningful employment, prevent and reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancies and births, and encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. While TANF treats these purposes distinctly and categorizes modes of assistance and service according to whether they are sufficiently oriented toward one purpose or another, these purposes are perhaps only different in kind insofar as they ought to be understood as unilaterally fostering integral development and human flourishing.

While integral development has only recently received attention in theories of human services and welfare, it is a particularly apt term. Initially developed in the domain of development, the discipline centered primarily on promoting economic growth and secondarily promoting correlative poverty reduction through policy interventions, integral development, as defined by its progenitor, French Dominican priest and pioneering social scientist, Louis-Joseph Lebreton (1897-1966), signifies that development must not merely be economic, but rather personal. Integral development means developing “the whole person, not just the monetary or narrowly understood economic development, but also social, political, creative, spiritual, etc.” (Keleher, 2017, p. 30). Moreover, integral development means facilitating the development of every person through appropriate means, not merely the poor but also the wealthy, as a “mutual recognition of human dignity” (Keleher, 2017, pp. 30-31). Assuming this robust vision, integral development represents not merely a Copernican moment or paradigm shift within developmental science, but also within subsidiary domains essential to achieving this systemic development, including the delivery of human services and assistance, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

Facially, as a policy intervention centered on poverty reduction, TANF fits comfortably within the discipline of development as a means to promote development and thus invites the utilization of terms originating from this field even if TANF is not principally considered in this paper as part of a larger body of development policy in the state of Texas. Yet, with the replacement of AFDC by TANF, TANF is not merely a tool for development, insofar as development is understood as a means of facilitating economic growth and reducing poverty. To put it laconically, the days of cash assistance entitlements are long over. The focus of TANF has expanded from exclusively or principally economic concerns to holistic concerns about the integral or complete character of the recipient by promoting individual and familial growth in non-exclusively economic goods such as the integrity of the two-parent household, the attainment of stable and meaningful work, and ultimately, the attainment of a degree of individual and familial self-sufficiency that allows for the fullest possible participation in the life of the household and the broader community.

The upshot of these characteristics is that “integral development” is a fitting *raison d’être* for TANF, providing a framework for conceptualizing its character, functions, and purposes. Moreover, “integral development” allows for the conceptualization of TANF across four distinct strata: political-developmental, programmatic, familial, and individual.

At the political-developmental level, TANF represents an essential tool for the state of Texas of promoting integral development insofar as it not only seeks to stimulate economic growth and poverty reduction, but its emphases on family and work—two essential elements to human wellbeing and flourishing—affirm that “persons as not isolated individuals,” but rather as beings who “flourish in community, in relation with other persons... the community is more than the sum of separate parts” (Gasper, 2021, p. 154).

At the programmatic level, integral development allows for a potent means to craft and shape the structure of state TANF programs. If, then, TANF represents a concerted effort to go beyond merely ensuring economic subsistence by promoting stability in non-exclusively economic domains, TANF policies must be crafted in a manner that supports a “capabilities approach” that reflects the essential anthropological assumptions of integral development that the person possesses inherent and intrinsic dignity ordered to flourishing defined by fulfillment in several domains. This “capabilities approach” views “each person as an end, asking not just about the total or average well-being but about the opportunities available to each person,” but to “improve the quality of life,” a person as defined by their capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011, pp. 18-19).

At the familial level, integral development requires a genuine commitment to the family unit as a relational good essential to the well-being of the individual and the community. The family and its members must experience integral development but also contribute to the broader phenomenon of integral development in the community. Precisely, the family is “one of the most important originators of positive social externalities,” which “gives” to both society and the individual (Zamagni, 2023, p. 482). To society, the family gives five externalities. The first is children, who are essential for the reproduction of society. Second, the family is a powerful economic “shock-absorber, as it collects and redirects family income” among its members, even across generations, among parents and children, and even grandparents, thus aiding in improving both the condition of households and the economic output of households (Zamagni, 2023, pp. 482-483). Third, the family supports the most vulnerable in its care, namely children, serving as a “provider against various risks persons face through their life in an uncertain world,” (Zamagni, 2023, p. 483). In other words, the family unit is essential for guiding the development of its vulnerable members, such as children, who, in the absence of parental guidance, may fall into behaviors that not only harm their own personal flourishing but also harm

the common good by engaging in delinquent or asocial behavior. In this respect, the family may be said to be a “risk-sharing institution,” insofar as it is a space for children to develop—and thus make mistakes and receive correction and guidance from their mother and father—and prevent the externalization of harmful or injurious habits to the broader social fabric (Zamagni, 2023, p. 483). Fourth, the family is an essential place for the creation of human capital. As the family is a relational structure that is “less subject to opportunistic phenomena,” the family is a valuable space for the “systematic transfer of knowledge,” from older members to younger members, enabling these younger members to develop skills, values, and knowledge that will propel them into a fulfilling adulthood according to their capabilities (Zamagni, 2023, p. 483). Finally, the family is the principal space for education for children, and a “stronger family,” characterized by a degree of independence according to its collectively realized capabilities, “provides the individual with a higher, *coet-eris paribus*, effective stock of skills and competences and thus a higher average productivity for the whole system” (Zamagni, 2023, p. 484). Put succinctly, to play its essential role in society, the family must be “optimized” through the integral, holistic development of the unit and its members. TANF, therefore, plays a real role in ensuring that assistance reasonably maximizes families’ capabilities through statutorily permissible means. Moreover, the role of the family invites states to meaningfully use TANF dollars to develop programs directed toward these ends.

As for the individual, while TANF seeks to principally aid families, the individual must be understood as a member of the family with infinite and inherent dignity who is both the object of integral development understood as a systematic coordination of policies and the acting subject of integral development when understood from the personalistic perspective, *viz.* the individual who seeks fulfillment across several domains and thus human flourishing. The principal lesson of integral development in the context of TANF is that the recipient is not merely a data point on welfare rolls. Rather, he is a person who is the “artisan of his own destiny,” insofar as he has substantial freedom to utilize his combined capabilities (Pope, 2019). His combined capabilities represent the fusion of internal states such as personality traits, intellectual and emotional capacities, health, skills, and the external circumstances defining his “social, economic, familial, and political environment” (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 20–21). These combined capabilities represent the “totality of opportunities” one has for choice and action in their specific circumstances (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 21). These capabilities are ordered toward the “nested hierarchy of needs and of inclinations,” including fulfillment across mental, physical, psychological, spiritual, relational, and social domains. Achieving this fulfillment via the exercise of one’s capabilities enables man to be the artisan of his existence. In this way, he can fulfill his material needs via goods such as food, water, and shelter, his rational needs via education, arts, and other “goods that ennoble us,” and his social needs via existence as a “constructive participant within family, neighborhood and other associations within civil society” (Pope, 2019, p. 126–128). Yet, while some individuals need assistance to stabilize themselves on a path toward fulfillment and assume an artisan role in their lives, long-term fulfillment necessarily depends on sustainable work. Indeed, “jobless people endure psychological suffering, a condition that has nothing to do with decreased income but is instead related to the ability to do and to learn” (Zamagni, 2003, p. 268). Simply put, the absence of work is not “merely a deficiency of income that can be made up through transfers by the state... it is also a source of far-reaching debilitating effects on individual freedom, initiative, and skills” (Sen, 1999, p. 26). Moreover, unemployment leads to chronic effects, leading to “loss of work motivation, skills, and self-confidence, increase in ailments and morbidity, disruption of family relations and social life, [and] hardening of social exclusion” (Sen, 1999, p. 79). The perils of lack of meaningful work, therefore, are “a circumstance that no official statistics will ever manage to reveal” (Zamagni, 2003, p. 268). Therefore, to promote the real integral development of the individual, TANF policies ought not be myopic; they should be crafted with an awareness that for the independence the program seeks to inculcate, individuals must be set on a path to stable employment. Put plainly,

notwithstanding the short-term nature of TANF assistance, the effects of assistance on recipients must be far-reaching. Moreover, even though TANF is oriented toward facilitating material independence, TANF administrators must not forget that the fulfillment and flourishing of individuals depends upon this independence. Human flourishing of the individual, understood as the fulfillment of the varied domains within the family, is the ultimate end, both to enable recipients to participate more fruitfully and meaningfully in society and to reduce the need for and costs of assistance programs.

## **TANF AS A PROGRAMMATIC TOOL TO PROMOTE FLOURISHING: AN EMPIRICAL REVIEW**

If integral human development and human flourishing are the ultimate ends of TANF and its four purposes, it is necessary to inquire whether the program, as it presently exists in Texas, has been effective in actualizing those goals. Moreover, if the effective achievement of the four TANF purposes is understood as coterminous with the promotion and facilitation of integral development and human flourishing among the needy who receive TANF assistance, then the effectiveness of the four purposes in achieving their distinct goals will thus reveal if TANF administration has been successful in functioning as a programmatic means to support integral development for families and individuals.

State-level and national data on TANF outcomes reveal a complex picture and allow only for a narrow appraisal of its efficacy. What is ascertainable is that the 1996 welfare reform is correlated with “participation in the TANF program, increased employment and earnings, and decreased total after-tax and transfer incomes, at least in the lower half of the income distribution of single mothers;” however, the magnitude of these effects is subject to “wide disagreement,” (Ziliak, 2016, p. 380). For example, following the 1996 reform, TANF caseloads in most states declined by 50% or more, with only Hawaii experiencing an increase (Ziliak, 2016). Notably, from 1993 to 2000, Texas witnessed a 60% decline in caseload (Ziliak, 2016). Two policies, namely work requirements and time limits, “contributed to the decline in welfare use and rise in employment rates,” across the country (Ziliak, 2016, p. 380). Yet, since the 1996 welfare reform did not occur in a vacuum (and neither does the administration of TANF into the present), Ziliak (2016, p. 351) indicates that the positive trends and decrease in caseloads in the period following reform are also the consequence of a “strong macroeconomy.” The concomitant decrease in caseloads and the strong late-1990s economy, however, obscures the fact that TANF is not responsive to the business cycle, insofar as the program, as a fixed block grant, does not expand to meet need. Thus, caseloads are not necessarily a reliable indicator of the efficacy of TANF, and only an indicator of the number of individuals receiving cash assistance (Ziliak, 2016).

Employment outcomes further underscore the limitations of TANF’s efficacy. While most parents exiting TANF obtain employment, these jobs are often low-wage, unstable, and offer little opportunity for upward mobility (Safawi & Pavetti, 2020). As a result, employment does not reliably translate into self-sufficiency, and many families remain economically vulnerable despite participation in the workforce. This disconnect highlights structural limitations in TANF’s design, prioritizing rapid labor market entry without sufficient attention to job quality or long-term earnings capacity. At the same time, the program’s reach has contracted significantly. By 2016, only 23 out of every 100 families living in poverty in the United States received TANF assistance, compared to 69 out of 100 under the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program prior to reform (Haskins & Weidinger, 2019).

Differences in state implementation further complicate the assessment of TANF’s effectiveness. States retain broad authority over program design, including how funds are allocated and how outcomes are measured.

However, many states rely on narrow performance metrics that capture only short-term employment outcomes while failing to track long-term earnings, job stability, or retention (Hahn et al., 2018). Indeed, few states systematically measure whether recipients maintain employment over time, limiting the ability to evaluate whether TANF achieves sustained economic mobility.

Evidence from Texas illustrates how these broader trends manifest at the state level. Despite considerable flexibility in the use of TANF funds, a relatively small portion of funding in Texas is directed toward direct cash assistance, with significant shares allocated to administrative costs and other services (SAO, 2022). This allocation structure may reduce the program’s immediate impact on family financial stability and contribute to low participation rates among eligible households. Qualitative evidence reinforces these findings by illustrating how families navigate the gaps in formal assistance. Research in the Rio Grande Valley indicates that households often rely more heavily on informal support networks than on TANF benefits, reflecting both limited benefit levels and barriers to access (Harvey, 2011). This reliance on non-governmental support structures suggests that TANF, in its current configuration, may function as a supplemental rather than a foundational safety net.

Additionally, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Texas has one of the lowest TANF-to-Poverty ratios in the United States, only ranking above Arkansas. As of 2023, Texas’s ratio is 2:100, meaning that for every 100 persons in poverty, only 2 are aided by TANF (CBPP, 2023). This may suggest a misdirection of funds, as the number of families in poverty has consistently exceeded the number receiving TANF benefits, with approximately 200,000 families in poverty while only 10,245 received TANF assistance (CBPP, 2023).

Taken together, this data indicates that TANF’s current structure has limited effectiveness in reducing poverty or promoting long-term self-sufficiency. Declining caseloads, constrained program reach, weak employment outcomes, and inconsistent state-level implementation indicate inefficiencies in resource allocation. These findings do not reflect inherent limitations of TANF as a funding stream; rather, they are the consequence of policy design choices. Given the program’s flexibility, states can reallocate TANF funds to more effective benefits and services, thereby better aligning program outcomes with its statutory goals. Moreover, if the TANF program and its four purposes are viewed as avenues for promoting integral development and human flourishing, it is all the more important that states like Texas use their TANF funds effectively.

CONTEMPORARY STATE OF TANF IN TEXAS

As PRWORA permits states to design their own TANF program architecture, there exist considerable differences in program policies among the states. The following table highlights the essential characteristics of TANF policies in the state of Texas (Welfare Rules Database, 2024):

**Table 6**  
*Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Policies in Texas as of 2023*

| Formal Diversion Payments                                      |                            |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Diversion Program                                              | Yes                        |
| Maximum Diversion Payment                                      | \$1,000                    |
| Form of Payment                                                | Cash                       |
| How often recipient may receive max. payment                   | Once every 12-month period |
| Period of TANF ineligibility after receiving diversion payment | 12 months                  |
| Payment counts toward time limit?                              | No                         |

| Mandatory Job Search at Application                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Job search required?                                                                                                              | No                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Description of job search requirement                                                                                             | N/A                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Individuals exempt from job search at application                                                                                 | N/A                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Noncompliance penalty                                                                                                             | N/A                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| COVID-19 job search requirement suspension                                                                                        | N/A                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Eligibility Due to Pregnancy with No Other Children                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Mother eligible for benefits?                                                                                                     | No                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Father eligible for benefits?                                                                                                     | No                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Unborn child eligible for benefits?                                                                                               | No                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Mother eligible in what month of pregnancy?                                                                                       | N/A                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Eligibility Rules for Two-Parent Applicant Units for Non-Disabled Parents                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Upper limit on monthly work hours                                                                                                 | No Limit                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Work history test                                                                                                                 | No                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Application waiting period after employment termination                                                                           | None                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Special Rules Imposed on Minor Parent Eligibility                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Minor Parent can be head of household unit?                                                                                       | Yes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Living arrangement restriction                                                                                                    | Yes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Inclusion of Stepparents in the Assistance Unit                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Inclusion?                                                                                                                        | Prohibited                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Eligibility of Non-Exempt, Pre-PRWORA, Qualified Non-Citizens                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Lawful Permanent Residents                                                                                                        | All                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Asylees                                                                                                                           | All                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Practices Regarding Eligibility of Non-Citizens Who Entered After PRWORA Enactment and Are Ineligible for Federal TANF Assistance |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Lawful Permanent Resident eligibility within the first five years                                                                 | No. Some American Indians born in Canada may be recognized as qualified non-citizens. If a non-citizen who entered the U.S. before PRWORA has 40 quarters of work and cannot prove continuous residence, they are potentially eligible. |
| Parolee eligibility within the first five years                                                                                   | No                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Battered Non-Citizen eligibility within the first five years                                                                      | No                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Non-Qualified Non-Citizen eligibility                                                                                             | No                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Eligibility of Post-PRWORA Qualified Non-Citizens after Five Years                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Lawful Permanent Resident                                                                                                         | Some, only if they have forty hours of qualifying work.                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Asylee                                                                                                                            | None                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Deportee                                                                                                                          | None                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Parolee                                                                                                                           | None                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Battered Non-Citizen                                                                                                              | None                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

| Treatment of Non-Caretaker Adult in Household Unit                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Subgroup of Non-Caretaker Adults eligible for assistance as unit member?                                | Relatives                                                                                                                                                          |
| Subgroup of TANF-Excluded Non-Caretaker Adults whose income is counted against the unit for eligibility | Not Counted                                                                                                                                                        |
| Quantity of TANF-Excluded Non-Caretaker Adult income counted                                            | N/A                                                                                                                                                                |
| Effects of TANF-Excluded Non-Caretaker Adult on benefits and eligibility                                | No Effect                                                                                                                                                          |
| Penalties if sharing living costs with TANF-Excluded Non-Caretaker Adult                                | N/A                                                                                                                                                                |
| Eligibility Requirements for Children                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Maximum eligible age if not attending school                                                            | 17                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Maximum eligible age if attending school                                                                | 18. The child is eligible through the month the child turns 19 if the child graduates from high school in the same month.                                          |
| Eligibility of children residing with Non-Relative Caretaker                                            | No                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Inclusion of Social Security Insurance Recipients in the Assistance Unit                                |                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Is a child who receives SSI included in the TANF unit with his/her parents or siblings?                 | No                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Is the adult who receives SSI included in the TANF unit with his/her children or spouse?                | No                                                                                                                                                                 |
| If an SSI recipient is included in the unit, is his/her income counted?                                 | N/A                                                                                                                                                                |
| Inclusion of Non-Parent Relative Caretaker in the Assistance Unit                                       |                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Non-Parent Relative Caretaker inclusion?                                                                | Optional for all                                                                                                                                                   |
| Which caretakers must be included?                                                                      | N/A                                                                                                                                                                |
| Which caretakers have the option to be included?                                                        | N/A                                                                                                                                                                |
| Which caretakers may not be included?                                                                   | N/A                                                                                                                                                                |
| Can a caretaker's spouse be included if the caretaker is included?                                      | No                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Asset Limits for Applicants                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Asset Limit                                                                                             | \$1,000                                                                                                                                                            |
| Vehicle Exemption                                                                                       | \$4,650 of each vehicle owned by the assistance unit. All vehicles used for income-producing purposes of transportation of a disabled household member are exempt. |
| Treatment of Grandparent Income                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Deemed available to minor and/or minor's child?                                                         | Yes                                                                                                                                                                |
| Earned income disregarded prior to deeming                                                              | \$120                                                                                                                                                              |
| Other income disregarded prior to deeming                                                               | 100% of the Budgetary Needs Standard (\$751) for unaided family members                                                                                            |
| Treatment of Stepparent Income                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Deeming                                                                                                 | Yes                                                                                                                                                                |
| Earned income disregarded prior to deeming                                                              | \$120                                                                                                                                                              |
| Other income disregarded prior to deeming                                                               | 100% of the Budgetary Needs Standard (\$751) for unaided family members                                                                                            |

| Income Eligibility Tests for Applicants                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Type of Test                                                               | Net income                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Income must be less than...                                                | 100% of the Budgetary Needs Standard (\$751)                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Maximum Earnings for Initial Eligibility for Family of Three               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Maximum monthly earnings to maintain eligibility                           | \$401                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Benefit Determination                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Benefit equals?                                                            | Maximum Grant minus net income                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Standards for Benefit Determination                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Payment Standard for a family of three                                     | \$372                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Maximum Monthly Benefit for a Family with No Income                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Family size = 2                                                            | \$283                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Family size = 3                                                            | \$327                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Family size = 4                                                            | \$393                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Family size = 5                                                            | \$436                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Family size = 6                                                            | \$501                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Maximum Monthly Benefit for a Child-Only Unit with One Child and No Income |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Child lives with non-parent-caretaker                                      | \$112                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Child lives with a parent excluded from the unit due to SSI                | \$112                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Child lives with a parent excluded due to immigrant status                 | \$112                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Behavioral Requirements                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| School requirements for minor children                                     | Yes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| School bonuses for attendance or achievement goals                         | No                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Immunization requirements                                                  | Yes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Health screening requirement                                               | Yes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Work-Related Activity Requirements for Single-Parent Head of Unit          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Timing of requirement relative to benefit receipt                          | Upon signing agreement                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Allowable activities                                                       | Basic or remedial education; high school/ GED; ESL; postsecondary education; job skills training; unsubsidized employment; work supplement; community service; self-employment; work experience programs; job readiness; job search. |
| Minimum hour requirement                                                   | 30                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Number of education hours that count toward work requirement               | 10                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Work Requirement Exemptions                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| If working an unsubsidized job for 30 hours a week                         | No                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| If ill or incapacitated                                                    | Yes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| If caring for an ill or incapacitated person                               | Yes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| If older than X years                                                      | 60. Yes                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| If in month X or later of pregnancy                                        | No                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| If caring for a child under age X (months)                                 | 12. Yes                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |

| Sanctions for Noncompliance with Work Requirements for Single-Parent Head of Unit  |                                                                            |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Reduction in benefits                                                              | Entire benefit                                                             |
| Length of initial sanctions                                                        | Until compliance or 1 month, whichever is longer.                          |
| Reduction in benefits due to the most severe sanction                              | Case is closed                                                             |
| Length of most severe sanction                                                     | Until compliance or 2 months, whichever is longer. Recipient must reapply. |
| Eligibility Rules for Non-Disabled Two-Parent Recipient Units                      |                                                                            |
| Upper limit on monthly work hours                                                  | No Limit                                                                   |
| Treatment of Child Support Income for Recipients                                   |                                                                            |
| Amount of child support counted for the recipient's eligibility determination      | All but \$75                                                               |
| Amount of child support collection transferred to the family                       | \$75                                                                       |
| Amount of child support transfer disregarded for benefit computation               | \$75                                                                       |
| Maximum Earnings for Ongoing Eligibility for a Family of Three                     |                                                                            |
| Maximum amount a recipient can earn and remain eligible for assistance in month 2  | \$1,708                                                                    |
| Maximum amount a recipient can earn and remain eligible for assistance in month 7  | \$308                                                                      |
| Maximum amount a recipient can earn and remain eligible for assistance in month 12 | \$308                                                                      |
| Maximum amount a recipient can earn and remain eligible for assistance in month 25 | \$308                                                                      |
| Family Cap Policies                                                                |                                                                            |
| Family Cap Policy Exist?                                                           | No                                                                         |
| Time Limit Policies                                                                |                                                                            |
| Lifetime time length in months                                                     | 60                                                                         |
| Unit loses the benefit upon reaching the lifetime length?                          | Yes                                                                        |
| Adult removed from unit upon reaching lifetime limit?                              | No                                                                         |
| Other consequences for reaching the lifetime limit?                                | N/A                                                                        |
| Intermittent time limit length in months                                           | 12, 24, or 36 months, followed by 60 months of ineligibility               |
| Unit loses the entire benefit upon reaching the intermittent time limit?           | No                                                                         |
| Adult removed from unit upon reaching the intermittent time limit?                 | Yes                                                                        |
| Time Limit Exemptions                                                              |                                                                            |
| Exempt if working or have earned income?                                           | No                                                                         |
| Exempt if cooperating but unable to find employment?                               | No                                                                         |
| Exempt if ill, incapacitated, or disabled?                                         | Yes                                                                        |
| Exempt if caring for a person who is ill, incapacitated, or disabled?              | Yes                                                                        |
| Exempt if caring for a child under X age (months)?                                 | 12. Yes                                                                    |
| Exempt if in month X or later of pregnancy?                                        | No                                                                         |

| Exempt if minor parent?                                                  | No                                                                             |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Exempt if age X or older?                                                | 60                                                                             |
| Exempt if victim of domestic violence?                                   | No                                                                             |
| Other exemptions?                                                        | If sanctioned for noncompliance. If unemployed due to high local unemployment. |
| Time Limit Extensions                                                    |                                                                                |
| Extension if working or had earned income?                               | Yes, only if earnings are up to \$168 per month.                               |
| Extension if cooperating but unable to find employment?                  | Yes                                                                            |
| Extension if unemployed due to high local unemployment?                  | Yes                                                                            |
| Extension if ill, incapacitated, or disabled?                            | Yes                                                                            |
| Extension if caring for a person who is ill, incapacitated, or disabled? | Yes                                                                            |
| Extension if caring for a child under X age (months)?                    | No                                                                             |
| Extension if in month X or later of pregnancy?                           | No                                                                             |
| Extension if age X or older?                                             | No                                                                             |
| Extension if victim of domestic violence?                                | Yes                                                                            |
| Other extensions?                                                        | If not receiving support services.                                             |

Under Texas Government Code § 531.005522, the State Auditor’s Office (SAO) contracted with PCG to perform an efficiency audit of Texas’s implementation and management of the federal TANF program and related state services. PCG reviewed 19 programs across four state agencies: HHSC, DFPS, TEA, and TWC. Between fiscal years 2018 and 2021, Texas received \$2.16 billion in TANF funds and expended approximately \$1.91 billion, averaging \$477.6 million annually (SAO, 2022).

Despite this substantial investment, the audit identified systemic administrative fragmentation and a lack of centralized accountability. Most notably, “There is no single agency that provides training, monitoring, and strategic visioning for Texas’ TANF funding and MOE requirements” (SAO, 2022, p. 39). Further compounding this issue, the audit found that the agency staff lacked a consistent understanding of both allowable TANF expenditures and the criteria governing MOE qualification. This lack of cohesion manifests in a funding structure heavily skewed towards certain agencies and program types, raising concerns about both administrative efficiency and alignment with TANF’s statutory purpose. This fragmentation is particularly significant given HHSC’s designated role as the administering authority for TANF in Texas. Despite this responsibility, the audit makes clear that HHSC has not exercised meaningful strategic direction over TANF funding or programmatic priorities. The absence of intentional policy direction in this area suggests not merely administrative inefficiency, but a broader neglect of one of TANF’s core purposes.

To better illustrate how TANF funds are distributed across administering agencies, the table below provides a breakdown of annual allocations by agency from fiscal years 2018 to 2021. This distribution highlights the concentration of funding within DFPS relative to other agencies and underscores broader concerns regarding alignment with TANF’s statutory objectives.

**Table 7***Breakdown of TANF Spending in Texas by Agency, Fiscal Years 2018–2021*

| Year | HHSC     | DFPS      | TWC      | TEA     |
|------|----------|-----------|----------|---------|
| 2018 | \$62.1 M | \$393.6 M | \$95.8 M | \$4.7 M |
| 2019 | \$58.3 M | \$395.4 M | \$94.1 M | \$4.6 M |
| 2020 | \$64.8 M | \$402.2 M | \$95.6 M | \$4.9 M |
| 2021 | \$64.9 M | \$401.9 M | \$95.6 M | \$4.9 M |

Note. Data are from SAO (2022, p. 26).

### HHSC

As the designated TANF coordinating agency in Texas, HHSC oversees the block grant and distributes funds to partner agencies (SAO, 2022, p. 1). However, the audit reveals that HHSC’s administrative role is undermined by deficiencies in oversight, compliance, and reporting accuracy (SAO, 2022, p. 7). More specifically, “Auditors identified errors in HHSC’s federal reporting” and “weaknesses in controls resulted in reporting inaccuracies” (SAO, 2022, p. 27). These findings are particularly significant given HHSC’s central coordinating role. Indeed, the absence of effective leadership is reflected in the audit’s broader conclusion that “No agency provided oversight or strategic visioning for TANF” (SAO, 2022, p. 6). Taken together, these deficiencies suggest that HHSC functions more as a fiscal intermediary than as a strategic administrator, which limits the state’s ability to align TANF expenditures with measurable outcomes such as employment, family stability, or reduced dependency.

Beyond technical deficiencies and oversight, HHSC also provided insufficient strategic direction for the coordination of TANF in Texas. As the agency charged with administering TANF, HHSC is positioned to align funding decisions with statutory priorities. However, the audit findings indicate that HHSC has not directed funds in a manner that meaningfully advances TANF’s stated purposes. There is little evidence of intentional investment in programs designed to promote the formation and stability of two-parent households, as contemplated under TANF’s fourth statutory purpose. This absence of direction has allowed funds to be distributed according to existing agency structures rather than a coherent policy vision, further entrenching misalignment between expenditures and intended outcomes.

### DFPS

DFPS is the primary recipient of TANF funds in Texas, receiving approximately 71% of the total allocation during the audit period (SAO, 2022, p. 5). These funds are largely directed toward Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI) and child welfare-related services.<sup>2</sup> However, the audit raises significant concerns regarding DFPS’s interpretation of TANF eligibility. Specifically, “DFPS indicated that essentially all of its Prevention and Early Intervention services would be eligible to be paid for with TANF funds” (SAO, 2022, p. 20). This expansive interpretation is justified through a broad conception of crisis. The audit questions the validity of this approach, noting that “It is not certain whether federal authorities would agree with DFPS’s interpretation” (SAO, 2022, p. 21).

2 Since the release of the 2023 audit, the PEI program has been transferred to the purview of the Texas HHSC. Because no subsequent audit has been conducted, updated data on how this transfer has affected the distribution of TANF funds are not yet available. Accordingly, the 2023 audit remains the best available reference for TANF spending and the program’s allocation at that time.

Additionally, documentation supporting these expenditures was found to be deficient. The concentration of TANF funding within DFPS, combined with an expansive and partially noncompliant interpretation of eligibility, suggests a structural reorientation of TANF away from its core purpose of promoting work and self-sufficiency, toward sustaining child welfare systems. This raises concerns about both legal compliance and programmatic productivity.

### TEA

In contrast to DFPS, TEA receives a negligible share of TANF block grant funding, less than 1% annually. However, its role in MOE expenditure is disproportionately large, making up over 85% of Texas's TANF MOE (SAO, 2022, p. 32). The majority of these expenditures are concentrated in early childhood education: "The largest category was early care and education, specifically with the prekindergarten program operated by TEA. This accounted for 87.6% of all MOE expenditures" (SAO, 2022, p. 33). While early education may yield long-term benefits, its connection to TANF's immediate statutory goals (particularly work participation and income support) is indirect. This raises concerns that MOE expenditures may serve to supplant existing education funding rather than advance TANF-specific objectives.

The audit identified findings related to TEA's performance, notably that TEA "did not correctly complete the ACF-204" reporting form and answered two questions incorrectly (SAO, 2022, p. 27). Thus, TEA represents a structural paradox within Texas's TANF framework: minimal direct programmatic responsibility, yet substantial influence over federal compliance through MOE spending.

### TWC

TWC administers workforce development and employment-related services and is therefore the agency most closely aligned with TANF's statutory objective of promoting work and self-sufficiency. Despite this alignment, TWC receives a comparatively modest share of TANF funding, averaging approximately 17%. A 2023 audit from the Texas State Auditor's Office examined this gap in agency-level detail:

"We would expect to see more funding allocated to TWC, whose sole mission is to 'oversee and provide workforce development services to employers and job seekers of Texas.' This agency received, on average, 17% of the TANF block grant. Instead, we found that over 71% of the allocation was to DFPS..." (SAO, 2022, p. 41).

This allocation structure limits the state's investment in programs most likely to produce measurable outcomes such as employment, earnings growth, and reduced reliance on public assistance. More broadly, it reflects a systemic misalignment identified throughout the audit: TANF funding in Texas is not distributed primarily according to outcome-based performance measures. Instead, resources are concentrated in service areas, such as child welfare and education, that, while important, are only indirectly related to TANF's core objectives.

The audit findings reveal a fragmented and misaligned TANF system in Texas. This structure suggests that TANF in Texas functions less as a targeted work-support program and more as a flexible funding stream for a diverse set of state services. The absence of centralized accountability and outcome-based performance metrics raises significant concerns about statutory compliance and the program's overall effectiveness in promoting family stability and self-sufficiency.

## **POLICY PRESCRIPTIONS: REORIENTING TANF TOWARD INTEGRAL DEVELOPMENT AND HUMAN FLOURISHING**

If Temporary Assistance for Needy Families represents a powerful means to promote the integral development and flourishing of individuals and families through policy interventions aligned with its four purposes, and if Texas has the means to design its program in a manner most conducive to that development and flourishing, some policy prescriptions are in order. Of note, all four agencies produced responses to the audit, indicating a real commitment to resolving the problems identified by auditors ([SAO, 2022](#)). The progress or success of the resolution of specific problems identified by the audit is presently unknown.

First, at the systemic level, to address the functional problems plaguing TANF administration, the Health and Human Services Commission ought to establish a comprehensive set of rules defining its state-level role as the cognizant agency. This set of rules ought to be developed in concert with input from other state agencies responsible for TANF, including the Department of Family and Protective Services, the Texas Education Agency, and the Texas Workforce Commission. As HHSC's apparent nonfeasance has resulted in knowledge asymmetry regarding TANF rules, confusion about the categorization of assistance programs, and other administrative errors, it is imperative that leadership and direction issues be addressed to ensure the most effective and efficient delivery of services in Texas. After all, if TANF is a means to promote the flourishing of individuals and families, then errors that alter service delivery, assistance, program-specific funding, or other processes essential to the recipient's interaction with TANF may indirectly dampen their integral development. Notably, HHSC communicated in their response to the audit's prescriptions concerning the agency's administrative functions that the agency will "increase the formalization of the TANF Program to ensure training, roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and audible for compliance," ([SAO, 2022, p. 242](#)).

Second, to fully realize the potential of TANF and promote integral human development and flourishing, Texas ought to tap into its large pool of rollover TANF dollars and use them to better support Purpose 4: the promotion and maintenance of two-parent families. Compared with other categories, Purpose 4 receives meager funding. To rectify this, the Texas Legislature, in cooperation with the four administrative agencies, ought to develop programs that meet Purpose 4. In its response to the audit, HHSC asserted that the agency will work to "internally align" the Healthy Marriages Program (a program that meets the goals of Purpose 4) with statutory requirements to provide services and benefits ([SAO, 2022, p. 246](#)). Notwithstanding future expansion or development of the Healthy Marriages Program, there may be additional avenues to meet Purpose 4 in Texas.

Third, since integral human development and flourishing depend, in part, on the sustainable, long-term actualization of one's capabilities, which is itself greatly aided by stable employment, Texas ought to engage in both short- and long-term tracking of the outcomes of TANF recipients. While the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023 requires tracking short-term employment outcomes for beneficiaries, this tracking ultimately provides only a partial picture of the development of individuals and families. Specifically, FRA requires the following:

- The percentage of individuals who were work-eligible individuals as of the time of exit from the program, who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after the exit.
- The percentage of individuals who were work-eligible individuals who were in unsubsidized employment in the second quarter after the exit, who are also in unsubsidized employment during the fourth quarter after the exit.

- The median earnings of individuals who were work-eligible individuals as of the time of exit from the program, who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after the exit.
- The percentage of individuals who have not attained 24 years of age, are attending high school or enrolled in an equivalency program, and are work-eligible individuals or were work-eligible individuals as of the time of exit from the program, who obtain a high school degree or its recognized equivalent while receiving assistance under a State program funded under this part or within 1 year after the exit.

Absent from these prescriptions are requirements for long-term outcome tracking. If the state of Texas develops a long-term means to track TANF recipients, it will provide critical information on the efficacy of TANF programs and inform policymakers and legislators about ways to improve them. Together, these prescriptions do not represent a panacea for resolving all questions of integral development and flourishing for the needy, but rather a potent means to reorient TANF toward achieving its goals more effectively.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families federal block grant program represents a powerful means of setting individuals and families on the path to integral development and flourishing. Established in 1996 to replace the Aid for Families with Dependent Children, TANF was a paradigm shift in human services and welfare in the United States, departing from a cash assistance entitlement program and in turn moving towards a program centered on four principal goals: ensuring that children can be raised in their own homes, ending the dependence of individuals and families on welfare, decreasing out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and promoting and maintaining stable, two-parent households.

Ultimately, the four purposes reflect a broader underlying vision of TANF concerning integral human development and human flourishing. Integral human development describes both the systemic process and the individual maturation in which each and every person, to the best of their capabilities, may fulfill multidimensional areas of their life that are not merely economic, such as mental, physical, spiritual, educational, or social domains. Fulfillment in these domains represents human flourishing, where each person, according to his needs and desires, can, as a rational being, pursue their own personal good, and thus contribute to the common good. Nevertheless, this flourishing depends on the individual's being in a family and in a broader political community; yet their participation in the family and in the broader community is dependent on their own material well-being. Indeed, without basic sustenance, they are unable to provide for themselves or engage with the broader world. However, mere government assistance is not sufficient. Long-term, stable employment is necessary to sustainably support development, fulfillment, and thus flourishing, as it not only provides material sustenance and income but also fosters the person's internal and psychological well-being, which is necessary for the exercise of their capabilities. Integral development, therefore, requires that, for humans to fulfill themselves across the varied dimensions that contribute to human happiness and flourishing by using their capabilities, they must have a degree of self-sufficiency.

Yet, as a programmatic means of aiding individuals in their integral development, TANF in Texas is presently beset by several problems. First, while it is federally recognized as the cognizant agency in Texas for TANF administration, the Health and Human Services Commission lacks any comprehensive vision of its leadership. Second, Purpose 4 of TANF—the promotion and maintenance of two-parent households—is underfunded relative to other purposes in Texas. Third, Texas does not track the long-term outcomes of TANF recipients.

These problems present a serious stumbling block to integral human development at the programmatic, familial, and individual levels. Programmatically, the efficacy of TANF administration is hindered by a lack of clear leadership. Familially, more might be done to support the maintenance of two-parent families, which represent not only the principal concern of TANF, but an essential unit for the integral development of individuals, and thus the attainment of the common good of each and every Texan as an individual with capabilities, desires, and needs to be fulfilled. Thus, at the individual level, TANF administration must center on responding to the specific needs of each individual who engages with TANF programs and setting them on a trajectory for long-term, sustainable flourishing.

The two fundamental principles of integral development, namely that each person's flourishing depends on the actualization of their capacities across multiple dimensions and that each and every person necessarily desires this flourishing, ought thus to inspire a real and meaningful reorientation and refinement of TANF in Texas. Since the flourishing of Texas depends on the flourishing of each and every Texan as the artisan of his or her own existence, it is thus imperative that Texas policymakers refine and reorient TANF so that the neediest might be set on a path of independence and flourishing. Indeed, each person, marked by infinite and inherent dignity, using only his capabilities, can grow in his humanity and perfect himself, and thus perfect Texas. ■

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Hannah Bruck** is the Campaign Director for the Family Success Project at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, where she specializes in family policy research and quantitative assessments of legislative effectiveness in the Texas Legislature. She is passionate about advancing policies that strengthen families and foster thriving communities.

Born in Dallas, Texas, to a family of educators, Hannah was raised with a deep appreciation for lifelong learning. She competed in speech and debate throughout her academic career, earning recognition at the national level.

A graduate of Patrick Henry College, Hannah earned her B.A. in Government (Class of 2025) with a specialization in American Politics and Policy. For her senior thesis, she conducted an in-depth analysis of the “kingpin strategy” in Mexico and evaluated the broader effectiveness of U.S. intervention efforts, further developing her expertise in data-driven policy research and comparative analysis.

While at Patrick Henry College, Hannah represented her institution twice at the Transatlantic Dialogues in Paris, France, earning first place in 2024 and third place in 2025. These experiences broadened her perspective on governance, civic institutions, and the role that strong families play in fostering thriving societies.



**Noah Torres** is the Policy Director of the Family Success Project at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, where he focuses on state, federal, and international family law, child welfare, artificial intelligence regulation, and human services & welfare reform for the sake of promoting the flourishing of all Texans and the common good of Texas. Additionally, Noah previously worked on antitrust and competition law enforcement in healthcare during his tenure at the Foundation.

Prior to joining TPPF, Noah earned his B.A. in politics and theology ('21) and M.A. in politics ('23) at the University of Dallas. During his graduate studies, Noah worked within the Cambridge School tradition of intellectual history and authored his M.A. thesis on the 16th and 17th century political, legal, and ecclesiological thought of Francisco de Vitoria, Robert Bellarmine, Giovanni Botero, Paolo Sarpi, and Niccolò Machiavelli and their respective influences on the relationship between law and conscience as mediated by interpretations of the concepts of right, justice, sovereignty, and ‘reason of state’ in Papal governance, canon law, and Scholasticism. Noah remains an active participant in conversations relating to Scholastic political and legal thought, continuing to publish both on its intellectual history and its relevance to contemporary questions in academic journals such as *American Affairs* and the *Angelicum’s Forum*. Additionally, Noah is an advocate for the Tribunal of the Diocese of Austin, where he represents petitioners’ arguments in cases relating to the canonical status of marriages.

Noah is an active member of several political theory organizations, including Escuela Hispanica in Spain and Academia Tocqueville in France, as well as public policy organizations dedicated to AI law and philosophy, child protective services, religious liberty, and welfare reform.







901 Congress Avenue | Austin, Texas 78701 | (512) 472-2700 | [www.TexasPolicy.com](http://www.TexasPolicy.com)