

Testimony in Support of HB1043 – Hearing in House Appropriations Committee 3/10/22

Members of the House Appropriations Committee,

We are mothers who have experience with Maryland's Temporary Cash Assistance (TCA) program. We are the unspoken, unheard majority. We hope that you will listen to our testimony. How can you make a decision about something if you haven't experienced it? We are a collective sharing some of our individual experiences through our testimony.

TCA is not created for people to actually succeed – it is a revolving door.

The work programs they send you to don't put you in a position where you can make a living wage. With children, inflation, and rent, you can't afford to be on TCA and you can't afford to live on the wage a job would get you. That is how the system becomes your whole life.

The shelter where I was staying offered free summer camp for my children, but the TCA work program wouldn't work around the camp hours so that I could drop the kids off and pick them up. I went on my own and found a different work program at Goodwill that fit with the summer camp hours, and I took it back to DSS, but DSS said it wouldn't count for my TCA because DSS doesn't partner with Goodwill anymore. I could have taken a class when my children were safe over the summer. I could have had a certificate by the end of the summer and been ready to work.

I did complete the Microsoft program, which I didn't actually need because I had a degree already and knew the information, but they said they would refer you to a job at the end. They never referred me to a job, so I had to do the work program again and got sent to makeup artistry training. At least it was something I was interested in. I was referred to a community center to clean before that, which I don't mind cleaning because I have a background in that too, but it's hard on your body and wasn't helping me get towards my career goals. DSS has you fill out a form with all of your goals and your past experience, but no one reads it. They never even read it.

When they have training programs, a lot of them will only allow you to support yourself but so long. It's not helping people get a living wage. You're giving me a certificate, you're not giving me a license, a job, or a way to start my own business. And they just say "oh, it's better than McDonald's." A lot of things are better than McDonald's.

I was referred to a TCA work program where I was doing case work, and there were other people there who weren't on TCA doing that same job for an annual salary. And I was doing it for free – the same job and often more work than the people who were getting paid.

When it comes to work activity, there is a lot of favoritism. There were a couple of places that boasted and put up posters that if you do good enough for 90 days, we'll pick you, but they never did.

There is a lack of empathy. When someone reaches out for TCA, they need help.

I was dealing with domestic violence, mental health issues, and I got cancer. I didn't need to focus on work, I needed to take care of myself and my children. There is no empathy or understanding of your need to focus on yourself or your family.

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Anytime I've gotten TCA, there was never a conversation about less hours – only 40 hours. And I always worked up until the day I had my kids, I'm talking 40 weeks pregnant and over – and it was stressful. They would say "we'll put down 30 hours," but any place I had an internship it was always full-time 8 hours a day.

There is a lack of community and a lack of respect. There is no respect for us, no respect for women who fall into certain situations. I feel like I am being bullied and forced into something that doesn't work for me and my family. I was told by DSS to sit my 14-year-old at a McDonald's with some fries so I could go to a work program. If I had come up with that idea by myself, they would take my child from me. If I tried to work a regular job and sat my child at a restaurant, they would deem me unfit and take my child from me. TCA work activity is so important that you would tell me to leave my child alone, unsafe at McDonald's, but it's not important enough to talk to me about my goals and what I want for my future? Nobody ever talked to me about any of that.

We aren't given options. They're saying you've got to do this and you can't do this, and none of it makes sense. It's like we are chasing our tails.

When I was living in a shelter, I had to go back to DSS every 10 days to report on my situation so they could try to refer me to a work program. I had a 10-year old and a 14-year old. There was no childcare for kids that age, but the shelter has all these rules – you can't leave your children alone, can't leave them with someone. And you don't want them in a situation that is unsafe anyway. What was I supposed to do? These are challenges we face and it is completely unfair.

I have a background in housekeeping but I want to do something different. I told DSS I want to be a pharmacy tech. They said I had 18 days to find my own program, enroll, and get childcare. I wasn't offered help and had to try to find something by myself.

A lot of people don't know that you can actually find your own placement, it's called a self-referral, but DSS never tells you that. You can actually volunteer at your child's school, or do something else that allows you to be with your children and invest in them. When I learned about the TCA program and had the weapon of knowledge, I went to DSS asking questions and they were looking at me like "how do you know this?" It's like they don't want you to succeed.

We are passionate about this bill because we don't want other families and children to cry the tears that we and our children have had to cry trying to get TCA. We have faced uncertainty and bullying in situations when we should have been given opportunity and a chance. Life begins with mothers, the stronger and smarter, the better. We need a system revamped to lift us up and strengthen us, so that our children can reap into the future with us. **We want to break the cycle of poverty. We want to help our families. Will you help us? We ask that you please vote in favor of HB 1043.**

Tiffany Johnson, Tyra Jones, Kendra James, and Erika Young