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On 20th Anniversary of Passage of Federal Welfare Reform Advocates Say Changes Have Failed Missouri's Children & Families

Reforms Needed to Reduce Housing Insecurity, High Hunger Rate

(JEFFERSON CITY, MO)..... Despite claims of elected officials about the success of Missouri's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, the facts show otherwise, Missouri advocates said on today's 20th anniversary of federal welfare reform. Jeanette Mott Oxford, executive director of Empower Missouri said, "For the most part, Missouri has not used TANF to provide a safety net for families in need or to help parents prepare for or connect to work. The number of children living in deep poverty has climbed steeply."

The role of TANF as a safety net for the poorest of the poor in Missouri has weakened over time. According to the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), for every 100 poor families with children, only 28 received financial assistance from TANF in 2013-14, down from 82 in 1995-96, before the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 which Congress passed and Pres. Bill Clinton signed into law.

Oxford continued, "Missouri has also been unwilling to adjust TANF benefits upward to respond to increased costs of basic human needs. Missouri has not raised TANF benefits since 1991 when they went up \$3 from 1975 levels, leaving families on TANF in constant danger from housing insecurity and hunger." Missouri's benefits were 27% of the federal poverty level (FPL) in 1996, and in 2015 were 17.4% of the FPL.

Again according to CBPP, in 2015, Missouri invested only six percent of its TANF block grant in work activities, despite the claim that this has been the focus of welfare since the 1996 reforms. Natasha Pickens, Family Support Eligibility Specialist, Vice President, Missouri State Workers Union-CWA said, "My co-workers and I who administer the TANF program wish it was a more effective tool in lifting people out of poverty. Instead our state has repeatedly cut the number of staff who work with TANF clients and placed new barriers to accessing temporary assistance in the way of families in need."

Oxford concluded, "Our state's poor choices have led to our ranking as second in the nation in hunger and seventh in the nation in food insecurity. Empower Missouri calls on the state to reject punishment-based approaches to welfare reform like Senate Bill 24 from 2015 and to implement poverty solutions based on the very real challenges that families in poverty face."

Empower Missouri (www.EmpowerMissouri.org) was founded in 1901 as the Missouri Conference on Charities and Corrections. Empower Missouri advocates for the well-being of all-Missourians through civic leadership, education, and research.

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