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Delaying Implementation of Washington State's Full Pass-Through of Monthly Child Support Would Harm Families in Poverty

Testimony of Diana Azevedo-McCaffrey, Policy Analyst on Housing and Income Security Team, Before the Washington State House Appropriations Committee in Opposition to HB 2039

Thank you for the invitation to testify today. I am Diana Azevedo-McCaffrey, Policy Analyst on the Housing and Income Security team at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a nonpartisan research and policy institute in Washington, D.C. I lead the Center's work on the intersection of child support policy and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (TANF). Our main area of focus is promoting policy changes throughout the country that direct more child support to families currently receiving TANF and that formerly received TANF. I lead a coalition of state advocates across the country working to improve the child support program for families in poverty, and I provide technical assistance to advocates and other stakeholders on their efforts. Along with Vicki Turetsky, former Commissioner of the Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) during the Obama Administration, I have researched and co-authored several reports on this issue.

A little over half of states and the District of Columbia pass through some amount of child support payments to current and former TANF families. Washington state is slated to start passing through all monthly child support payments to current TANF families by January 2026. However, HB 2039 would delay implementation for an additional three years, until July 2029, so that the state can use child support dollars intended for children in poverty as a revenue source to address the state's budget deficit. Although withheld child support dollars are relatively small (and diminishing) amounts of funding for state and federal governments, the same isn't true for families — receiving their child support payments would provide them with a valuable income source that improves financial stability and promotes family wellbeing.

Each dollar held back from families as state revenue as a result of delaying the implementation would be vital income diverted away from a child living in deep poverty. Three years is a significant amount of time in a child's life to go without sufficient resources, and parents who turn to TANF to make ends meet need more income *now* to afford their children's basic needs that can often only be met with cash, like housing costs, school supplies, and diapers. In addition, depriving families in poverty of a valuable income source could lead to harms such as increasing their risk of child protective services involvement and contributing to their children's lasting negative health consequences.

In my testimony, I'll outline four key research-backed arguments for why I strongly oppose HB 2039 and urge the Washington state legislature to uphold the January 2026 implementation of the full monthly child support pass-through for TANF families.

Paying Child Support Collections to Families Increases Family Income and Improves Financial Stability

First, studies show that pass-through policies increase families' overall income, helping them meet children's basic needs that are often only met with cash — like housing costs, diapers, clothing, and school supplies.¹ A consistent stream of child support income also can promote financial stability and cushion families from the impact of unexpected expenditures or income losses.²

Families impacted by policies that withhold child support to reimburse TANF cash assistance typically have very low incomes, and they are overwhelmingly led by women and disproportionately women of color.³ These families who turn to TANF during times of need are already struggling to make ends meet and would greatly benefit from receiving their child support payments.

Studies show that child support is a valuable income source, particularly for families in poverty. Among custodial families with incomes below the federal poverty level, child support represents, on average, 41 percent of their income when received. That share is even larger for custodial families living below 50 percent of the federal poverty level, with child support making up 65 percent of their income when received.⁴

TANF benefits alone are not enough for most families to meet their needs. For families receiving TANF, benefits leave a family of three at or below 60 percent of the poverty line in every state. And in Washington

¹ Letitia Logan Passarella and Lauren A. Hall, "Child Support Pass-Through: Early Outcomes in Maryland," School of Social Work, University of Maryland, October 2021, <https://www.ssw.umaryland.edu/media/ssw/fwrtg/child-support-research/cs-initiatives/Child-Support-Pass-Through-Early-Outcomes.pdf>; Kye Lippold, Austin Nichols, and Elaine Sorensen, "Evaluation of the \$150 Child Support Pass-Through and Disregard Policy in the District of Columbia," Urban Institute, March 29, 2013, <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/evaluation-150-child-support-pass-through-and-disregard-policy-district-columbia>; Laura Wheaton and Sorensen, "The Potential Impact of Increasing Child Support Payments to TANF Families," Urban Institute, December 2007, <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/33011/411595-The-Potential-Impact-of-Increasing-Child-Support-Payments-to-TANF-Families.PDF>; Maria Cancian, Daniel R. Meyer, and Jennifer Roff, "Testing New Ways to Increase the Economic Well-Being of Single-Parent Families: The Effects of Child Support Policies on Welfare Participants," Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison, October 2007, <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/dps/pdfs/dp133007.pdf>; Wheaton and Sorensen, "Benefits and Costs of Increased Child Support Distribution to Current and Former Welfare Recipients," Urban Institute, October 16, 2005, https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/migrated_legacy_files/42146/report.pdf.

² Yoonsook Ha, Cancian, and Meyer, "The Regularity of Child Support and Its Contribution to the Regularity of Income," Social Service Review, Vol. 85, No. 3, September 2011, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/241138681_The_Regularity_of_Child_Support_and_Its_Contribution_to_the_Regularity_of_Income; Lisa A. Gennetian and Katherine Magnuson, "Three Reasons Why Providing Cash to Families is a Sound Policy Investment," CBPP, May 11, 2022, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/family-income-support/three-reasons-why-providing-cash-to-families-with-children-is-a>.

³ U.S. Office of Family Assistance (OFA), "Characteristics and Financial Circumstances of TANF Recipients Fiscal Year (FY) 2022," tables 1, 5, 6, 7, 17, 18, and 19, https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ofa/fy2022_characteristics.pdf.

⁴ Sorensen, "The Child Support Program is a Good Investment," U.S. Office of Child Support Services (OCSS), December 2016, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocse/sbtn_csp_is_a_good_investment.pdf.

state, TANF benefits leave a family of three at only 32 percent of the poverty line.⁵ By passing child support payments through to families and excluding those payments when determining families' TANF eligibility and benefits (also known as providing a "disregard"), states can help them better afford necessities and thrive.

Noncustodial Parents Pay More in Child Support When Their Payments Are Passed Through

Second, research shows that noncustodial parents are more likely to both pay child support and make higher payments when their payments are passed through to their children. Noncustodial parents also establish parentage, the legal prerequisite to a child support order, more readily when they know that the support they pay will benefit their children.⁶ And they are more willing to pay through the formal child support program, which ensures that their payments are credited against their support obligation and can improve payment regularity for families.⁷

A study from the University of Wisconsin compared families in an experimental group that received a pass-through and disregard of *all* current monthly child support payments with families in a control group that received a partial pass-through and disregard of current support (the greater of \$50 or 41 percent). The study found that by the third year of the experiment, noncustodial parents with a support order in the experimental group were 10 percent more likely to pay any child support than those in the control group. In addition, noncustodial parents with a support order in the experimental group paid 24 percent more in child support.⁸

Similarly, an Urban Institute study found that noncustodial parents in Washington, D.C. with a support order were 3 percentage points more likely to pay any child support, and paid 11 percent more support in TANF cases by the third year, under a \$150 pass-through and disregard policy than under the previous \$50 pass-through policy.⁹ And Colorado, in the first year after implementing its policy to pass through and disregard all current monthly support, found that total current collections for TANF families rose 76 percent based on an analysis of its administrative data.¹⁰

⁵ Diana Azevedo-McCaffrey and Tonanziht Aguas, "Continued Increases in TANF Benefit Levels Are Critical to Helping Families Meet Their Needs and Thrive," CBPP, updated May 29, 2024, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/income-security/continued-increases-in-tanf-benefit-levels-are-critical-to-helping>.

⁶ Cancian, Meyer, and Roff, *op. cit.*; Meyer and Cancian, "W-2 Child Support Demonstration Evaluation, Phase 1: Final Report, Volume I: Effects of the Experiment," Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison, April 2001, <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/csde-p1v1-full-report.pdf>.

⁷ Lisa Klein Vogel, "Barriers to Meeting Formal Child Support Obligations: Noncustodial Father Perspectives," *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 110, No. 2, March 2020, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338554399_Barriers_to_Meeting_Formal_Child_Support_Obligations_Noncustodial_Father_Perspectives; Samara Potter Gunter, "Effects of Child Support Pass-Through and Disregard Policies on In-Kind Child Support," *Review of Economics of the Household*, Vol. 11, January 18, 2012, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11150-012-9140-2>.

⁸ Cancian, Meyer, and Emma Caspar, "Welfare and Child Support: Complements, Not Substitutes," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, Vol. 27, No. 2, [https://users.ssc.wisc.edu/~gwallace/Papers/Cancian,%20Meyer,%20and%20Caspar%20\(2008\).pdf](https://users.ssc.wisc.edu/~gwallace/Papers/Cancian,%20Meyer,%20and%20Caspar%20(2008).pdf); Meyer and Cancian, *op. cit.*

⁹ Wheaton and Sorensen, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Michael Martinez-Schiferi, Tom Zolot, and Larry Desbien, "Poster Paper: Effects of Child Support Pass through on Colorado Families in Need," Colorado Department of Human Services, November 7, 2019, <https://appam.confex.com/appam/2019/webprogram/Paper30963.html>.

Directing Child Support to Families Reduces Risk of Child Protective Services Involvement

Third, passing through child support payments to families can reduce the risk of child protective services involvement. To study whether increased child support income passed through to families reduced reports of child maltreatment or neglect to the child welfare system, researchers in Wisconsin used administrative data collected for families that had participated in a pass-through demonstration. Families randomly assigned to the experimental group, received a full pass-through of current support, while families in the control group received a partial pass-through. The study produced consistent evidence that increasing the child support income that passes through to families can reduce reports of maltreatment or neglect, estimating that mothers who received a full pass-through were about 10 percent less likely to receive a “screened-in report” (a report to child protective services alleging child neglect or maltreatment that met state criteria for further assessment) than mothers who received a partial pass-through.¹¹

Families experiencing poverty are far more likely to be reported to child protective services than families with more resources.¹² Economic hardship may interfere with parents’ ability to provide their children with basic necessities like food, shelter, medical care, and supervision — factors that can contribute to a child welfare agency’s determination that a child is being neglected. Unemployment, housing instability, and eviction have all been associated with increased risk of families’ involvement in the child welfare system.

Studies have linked anti-poverty measures that increase family income and help parents provide their children with basic necessities with fewer reports of child neglect to child protective services.¹³ Even relatively small infusions of cash can make a difference by helping families maintain housing and employment or meet other expenses of raising children.

Receiving Child Support Linked to Positive Child Development Outcomes

Fourth, extensive research connects receiving child support payments to positive child developmental outcomes, including stronger school performance. Children who receive child support payments are more likely to receive higher grades, to have fewer school problems, to finish high school, and to attend college than their peers who do not receive child support.¹⁴

¹¹ Cancian, Kristen Shook Slack, and Mi You Yang, “The Effect of Family Income on Risk of Child Maltreatment,” Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison, August 2010, <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/resource/the-effect-of-family-income-on-risk-of-child-maltreatment/>.

¹² Child Welfare Information Gateway, “Separating Poverty from Neglect in Child Welfare,” February 2023, <https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/separating-poverty-neglect-child-welfare/>.

¹³ Nicole L. Kovski *et al.*, “Association of State-Level Earned Income Tax Credits With Rates of Reported Child Maltreatment, 2004-2017,” *Child Maltreatment*, Vol. 27, No. 3, January 19, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559520987302>; Henry T. Puls *et al.*, “State Spending on Public Benefit Programs and Child Maltreatment,” *Pediatrics*, Vol. 148, No. 5, November 1, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2021-050685>; Donna K. Ginther and Michelle Johnson-Motoyama, “Do State TANF Policies Affect Child Abuse and Neglect?” Iowa State University Department of Economics, October 27, 2017, https://www.econ.iastate.edu/files/events/files/gintherjohnsonmotoyama_appam.pdf.

¹⁴ Sorensen, 2016; Gerry L. White, Leon Banks, and Harold E. Briggs, “The Effects of Child Support Payment Factors on Satisfaction with Levels of Parental Involvement by Noncustodial Fathers,” *Research on Social Work Practice*, Vol. 31, No. 8, April 26, 2021, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/10497315211004744>; Laura M. Argys *et al.*, “The Impact of Child Support on Cognitive Outcomes of Young Children,” *Demography*, Vol. 35, No. 2, June 1998, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/13661295_The_Impact_of_Child_Support_on_Cognitive_Outcomes_of_Young_Children; Virginia Knox, “The Effects of Child Support Payments on Development Outcomes for Elementary School-Age Children,” *Journal of Human Resources*, Vol. 31, No. 4, Autumn 1996,

One reason for this connection may be that noncustodial parents who pay child support are more likely to stay engaged in their children's lives. Parental involvement and payment of child support tend to go hand in hand, with studies finding that payment of child support is associated with noncustodial parental contact.¹⁵ Parental involvement, in turn, is associated with positive outcomes in children's emotional well-being, social and behavioral adjustment, and academic achievement.¹⁶

Conclusion

I strongly urge the Washington state legislature to prioritize the financial stability and wellbeing of families experiencing poverty and prevent delaying the full pass-through of monthly child support for TANF families. Children and families benefit in multiple ways when they receive their child support payments. But child support loses its effectiveness when it is kept by governments rather than paid to families. Despite the importance of income support for families living in and near poverty, nearly half of the families participating in the child support program do not receive 100 percent of the child support payments made on their behalf.

There is broad consensus among parents, researchers, legislators on both sides of the aisle, policy analysts, advocates, and program administrators that child support should be paid to families in full, instead of used to reimburse the government for cash assistance.¹⁷ The gain for families is real — increasing the amount of child support they receive can not only help them make ends meet but enable them to thrive.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/146148?origin=crossref>; Garfinkel, Sara S. McLanahan, and Philip K. Robins, ed., "Child Support and Child Well-Being," Urban Institute Press, 1994; Quentin H. Riser, et al., "Noncustodial Parents, Instrumental Networks, and Child Support Compliance," *Social Science Research*, vol. 110, Feb. 2023, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0049089X23000054>.

¹⁵ Maureen R. Waller, Allison D. Emory, and Elise Paul, "Money, Time, or Something Else? Measuring Noncustodial Fathers' Informal and In-Kind Contributions," *Journal of Family Issues*, Vol. 39, No. 13, July 4, 2018, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0192513X18783801>; Steven Garasky *et al.*, "Toward a Fuller Understanding of Nonresident Father Involvement: An Examination of Child Support, In-Kind Support, and Visitation," *Population Research and Policy Review*, Vol. 29, No. 3, 2010, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11113-009-9148-3>.

¹⁶ Kari Adamsons and Sara K. Johnson, "An Updated and Expanded Meta-Analysis of Nonresident Fathering and Child Well-Being," *Journal of Family Psychology*, Vol. 27, No. 4, August 2013, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23978321/>; Michael Yogman and Craig F. Garfield, "Fathers' Roles in the Care and Development of Their Children: The Role of Pediatricians," *Pediatrics*, Vol. 138, No. 1, July 2016, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27296867/>; Lenna Nepomnyaschy, "Child Support and Father-Child Contact: Testing Reciprocal Pathways," *Demography*, Vol. 44, No. 1, February 2007, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1353/dem.2007.0008>; Center for Policy Research, "Child Access and Visitation Programs: Participant Outcomes," OCSS, 2006, <https://centerforpolicyresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/Child-Access-and-Visitation-Programs-Participant-Outcomes.pdf>; Sorensen, 2016. See also Elizabeth Peters *et al.*, "Legislating Love: The Effect of Child Support and Welfare Policies on Father-Child Contact," *Review of Economics of the Household*, Vol. 2, September 2004, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11150-004-5647-5>; Dan Bloom and Kay Sherwood, "Matching Opportunities to Obligations: Lessons for Child Support Reform from the Parents' Fair Share Pilot Phase," MDRC, 1994, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED373270.pdf>.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Cancian and Robert Doar, "Child Support Policy: Areas of Emerging Agreement and Ongoing Debate," McCourt School of Public Policy, Georgetown University and American Enterprise Institute, November 9, 2023, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/working-paper/child-support-policy-areas-of-emerging-agreement-and-ongoing-debate/>; Maretta McDonald *et al.*, "Factors That Impact the Child Support Program's Role in Reducing Child Poverty: Convening Summary," Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Office of Human Services Policy, September 2024, <https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/d3636e92120856f652a0d796d29a886d/factors-impact-child-support-programs.pdf>.