The General Accounting Office (GAO) has issued a report, Welfare Reform: More Coordinated Federal Effort Could Help States and Localities Move TANF Recipients With Impairments Toward Employment, that provides information on the identification and treatment practices of TANF programs toward persons with impairments. The report’s findings include:

- A total of 44% of TANF recipients reported having physical or mental impairments, almost 3 times the proportion reported among non-TANF adults. Thirty-eight percent of TANF recipients reported impairments that are categorized by the Census as severe, including conditions that prevented them from performing one or more activities, such as climbing a set of stairs or keeping track of money and bills.
- Most county TANF officials estimated that fewer than 20% of their TANF recipients had impairments.
- About 27% of counties reported exempting those identified with impairments from work requirements but not from the state’s time limit on the receipt of public assistance.
- About 20% of those with impairments reported working full- or part-time.
- Individuals with impairments severe enough to qualify for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits may in some cases remain on TANF for lack of referral to SSI, resulting in potential financial sanctions or time limits associated with an inability to comply with TANF program requirements.
- Individuals with impairments may be particularly vulnerable to sanctions, since many counties report making only one attempt to notify recipients that they are noncompliant before applying a sanction.
- TANF methods to screen for impairments rely heavily on self-disclosure. This would tend to under-report impairments since many disabilities may be unknown to recipients, and/or recipients may be reluctant to disclose an impairment for fear of the consequences or because they are not comfortable doing so.

The report is available at www.gao.gov, click on Find GAO Reports, then enter report # GAO-02-37.

According to America’s Second Harvest, more people are utilizing private charities than government-issued food stamps to fulfill their families’ food needs. The increased need is putting pressure on food pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters but they are unable to meet the demand. A recent survey reported an inability to meet the basic needs presented by an expanding clientele. Since 1997, food stamp receipt has dropped by four million people (last year alone saw a decrease of 40%) while use of private charities has increased by 1.5 million recipients. Findings include the following:
• For the average food stamp recipient, benefits last only two weeks of the month. One-third of food stamp recipients also rely on charities to help cover the remainder of their need.

• Twenty percent of those using private aid currently receive or have in the last two years received TANF benefits (twenty percent of this subgroup lost their TANF benefits due to time limits or sanctions).

• One-fourth of agencies face problems such as staffing, funding, and food shortages that threaten their continued operation.

• One-third of pantries turned away or were unable to serve clients in the past year. Reasons included lack of food, a restriction on number of visits per client, locales that were difficult for all clients to reach, and lack of client ID. Kitchens and shelters were even more inclined to turn visitors away for much of the same reasons as pantries.

The full report can be found at www.secondharvest.org/policy. -AL

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Problems with Child Support Distribution to TANF Leavers Cited by Inspector General

A recent report from the Office of the Inspector General (OIG), Distributing Collected Child Support to Families Exiting TANF, examines the process by which families who leave TANF receive the child support that is owed to them. While TANF families are required to assign their right to child support to the state while they receive welfare, once they leave they are entitled to the current portion of child support payments made on their behalf. The report notes that in many jurisdictions, income from child support is not transferred over to the family in a timely manner when they leave welfare. A state’s failure to distribute collections to the family at this point can leave families without access to income that is owed them at a time when they most need it. Findings from the report include:

• When TANF participants receive grants that are less than the monthly child support order, often because they are working and nearing a point of leaving welfare, states are not paying her the child support income that exceeds the grant in spite of her entitlement to that income. This is in part because, in the states that were studied for the report, automated systems were not designed to distribute excess collected child support.

• Families sanctioned for noncompliance often experience the same underpayment of child support.

• TANF agencies often lapse in notifying the Child Support Enforcement Agency that a participant has left TANF and the case has been closed. As a result, child support payments continue to be retained by the State when they legally belong to the family. In the five states studied, 8% of custodial parents experienced delays in child support payments and 3% were underpaid.

The report recommends better coordination between state child support and TANF Systems about their joint caseloads. The federal Office of Child Support Enforcement and the Office of Family Assistance are encouraged to assist states in improving automated systems, ensuring timely disbursement of collected support, establishing policies for handling excess child support, and improving accountability through state self-assessment processes.

The report is available on-line at www.hhs.gov/oig/oei. -RM
In spite of its shrinking caseloads, the state of North Carolina reports increased efforts to uncover welfare fraud and to prosecute offending women. A newly hired assistant district attorney will track welfare recipients who the state has found committing welfare fraud and order them to repay the state the discrepant amount. Already 54 women have been convicted. Among the convictions are: working low-wage jobs to augment monthly benefit checks; being on two different states’ welfare roles, and not reporting changes in circumstance to the welfare office. Prosecutors are also working on recouping overpayments of welfare from recipients who received the overpayments in error. The state is seeking a total of $635,000 in fraud and $1.4 million in overpayments. Inability to repay the state could result in a felony charge, being placed on probation with the order to repay the state, and being barred from receiving public assistance in the future.

*The full article, dated November 24, can be found at www.charlotte.com.*

Two recent reports provide additional information on the effect of welfare reform and other recent policy changes on low-income families.

- *Are California’s Welfare Leavers Staying Off Public Assistance?: Welfare Recidivism and Use of Non-Cash Aid Since Welfare Reform,* by Charles Lieberman and David Mancuso of the SPHERE Institute examines the experience of welfare families once they leave public assistance and the rate at which they are returning to welfare. *The report is available at www.sphereinstitute.org; click on California Policy Review.*

- *Policies Affecting New York City’s Low-Income Families,* from the National Center for Children in Poverty’s Research Forum on Children, Families, and the New Federalism, describes policy changes at the local, state and federal level that have affected low-income families and makes recommendations for each level of government to address the primary barriers faced by families on or leaving welfare. *The report is available at www.researchforum.org.*

$2 billion in Workforce Investment Act funds may be added to the senate economic stimulus bill as an amendment offered by Senator Kennedy (D-MA). The funds would aid workers who have been affected by the economic downturn as a result of September 11. To voice your support for the amendment, call the Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121 and ask for your Senators’ offices. Call Christin Driscoll of the Workforce Alliance, (202) 338-0737 x103 or christind@workforcealliance.org, with any questions or feedback.

The Employment and Training Administration (ETA) announces the availability of approximately $6 million in competitive grant funds for multi-state employment and training projects serving people with disabilities. The closing date for receipt of applications is December 21, 2001. For complete information on submission requirements go to http://wdsc.doleta.gov/sga/sga/02-100sga.htm.

The National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support, a grassroots coalition of 1,000 organizations advancing solutions to poverty at the state and national levels,
announces the *Make TANF Work!* Campaign. The campaign seeks to give voice to the concerns of the progressive community by pushing for a reorientation of TANF to provide economic security to all low-income families. For more information or to register as a member, contact them at info@nationalcampaign.org.

- A video documentary, *A Day's Work, A Day's Pay*, is a one-hour film that documents the experiences of workfare participants in New York, exposes the hardships forced on recipients, and portrays their organizing efforts to demand better protections and services. The film was produced by Mint Leaf Productions, a media production company that created social issue documentaries and videos. To obtain a copy of the video, call 1-888-367-9154 or email orders@newday.com.