

Building Secure and Healthy Families Act of 2002 (S.2876)

Sponsor: Senator Patty Murray (D-WA)

SEARAC supports Senator Murray's *Building Secure and Healthy Families Act of 2002*. This bill amends part A of Title IV of the *Social Security Act* in order to promote secure and healthy families under the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program. We support this bill because it addresses mental health and English as a second language as potential barriers to employment and it allows home childcare or care for a relative to fulfill work requirements. The primary provisions of this bill are divided into the following six sections: ensuring safety and self-sufficiency for all TANF recipients, caring for a child or other relative, equitable treatment for all families, improvement of addressing the needs of teen parents, elimination of full-family sanctions, and promoting secure and healthy families fund.

Ensuring safety and self-sufficiency for all TANF recipients:

When a potential beneficiary is initially assessed by the State to determine skills, prior work experience, and employability, the State will be required to consider potential barriers to employment, such as domestic or sexual violence, mental or physical health, learning disability, substance abuse, English as a second language, child care needs, insufficient housing, and transportation.

We support the inclusion of mental health as a potential barrier to employment. Due to torture and abuse they experienced in their countries of origin, many Southeast Asian refugees suffer from depression, flashbacks of torture, and post-traumatic stress, which impair their ability to work regularly. Mental and neurological illnesses often make it difficult, if not impossible, for members of the Southeast Asian community to secure or maintain employment. Thus, it is important for the State to recognize and acknowledge that mental health is a potentially serious barrier to employment.

We also support the language in this bill that includes limited English proficiency as a potential barrier to employment. Many Southeast Asian immigrants exhibit limited levels of English proficiency. According to the 1990 census, 73% of Cambodians, 78% of Hmong, 70% of Laotians, and 65% of Vietnamese "did not speak English very well." Low levels of English language skills and the lack of a formal education have served as barriers for Southeast Asians in securing and maintaining employment. It is important for the State to realize that a low level of English proficiency hinders many Southeast Asians as they are attempting to acquire employment.

This section also addresses domestic and sexual violence in the TANF program. Provisions are included on how the State will address the needs of TANF recipients who have become the victims of domestic or sexual violence. An individual who is receiving services as a victim of domestic or sexual violence will be considered to be engaged in work for a month. The Secretary will be required to conduct a study on the impact of

domestic or sexual violence rules, services, and practices, which will be broken down by race, and report these findings to Congress.

Caring for a child or other relative:

When the State performs an evaluation of an individual's barriers to employment, the necessity for the individual to care for a child or other relative with a serious health condition or disability will be included. Additionally, a recipient who is engaged in providing care to a child or relative with a serious health condition or disability will be considered to be engaged in work for a month.

We support the provision in this bill to have home childcare or care for a relative fulfill an adult's work requirements. Many Southeast Asian parents are not comfortable with placing their children in childcare outside of the home. The option of home child care fulfilling work requirements would entitle Southeast Asians to receive TANF benefits, allowing them to adequately provide their children with financial and emotional support, and also make the parents feel more comfortable knowing that their child is in care that they can trust.

Due to traditional family structure, it is not uncommon for many Southeast Asian families to have an elderly parent for whom they must care living with the family. In many situations, this relative may require constant care, making it virtually impossible for the family member who must care for him or her to hold a job outside of the home. Care for a relative fulfilling work requirements would allow this family member to remain home and retain eligibility for TANF benefits without jeopardizing the financial support for the remaining family members, such as children, if they are unable to work.

Limitations will be placed on work requirements for single parents with children under age six and between the ages of six and thirteen. Relative caretakers may be exempted from work requirements and may also be entitled to the same benefits as other adult recipients. The State may not terminate assistance to a parent with a child under thirteen years of age if the individual refuses to work due to the inability to access appropriate childcare.

Equitable treatment for all families:

The State may not discriminate against a needy family based on marital status or family structure when awarding TANF grants.

Improvement of addressing the needs of teen parents:

The State is given the authority to assist teen parents in meeting the qualifications to become eligible for TANF benefits. Teen parents may participate in educational activities directed toward the attainment of a high school diploma or an alternative education or training program approved by the State. The State may provide assistance prior to the parent's enrollment in order to assist him or her with complying with the requirements for benefit eligibility. Additionally, a teen parent who maintains satisfactory school attendance will fulfill his or her work participation requirements. The Secretary will be required to conduct a study of parents under the age of twenty who are

recipients of TANF benefits and who are not recipients of TANF benefits and report these findings to Congress.

Elimination of full-family sanctions:

The State may reduce the amount of assistance otherwise payable to the family if a member of the family refuses to engage in the work required for the program. However, the State will not be allowed to terminate benefits if this refusal should occur.

Promoting secure and healthy families fund:

A secure and healthy families fund will provide grants to States and localities. These funds will be utilized to encourage secure families through programs designed to strengthen families by income enhancement; provide education, opportunity, and support to teens in order to reduce the instances of teen pregnancy; and increase the ability of low-income parents to provide emotional and financial support to their children by the acquisition and maintenance of employment and child care and the fulfillment of other basic needs.