LESSONS AND INSIGHTS

Learning Group on Asset Limits

November 2013 - March 2014

Background

In the fall of 2013 and winter of 2014, 10 leaders from 10 Assets & Opportunity Network Lead Organizations participated in a learning group focused on lifting asset limits in public benefit programs. In addition to interactive discussion and sharing lessons and challenges, the five sessions also included peer case studies, expert advice, and model documents and resources. The group was facilitated by two Network leaders, Lucy Mullany from the Illinois Asset Building Group and Robin McKinney from the Maryland CASH Campaign.

The five sessions of the Learning Group focused on:

Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4	Session 5
Introducing the issue; gathering, analyzing and using **data** to make the case	Developing **compelling messages** for communicating with key influencers	**Legislative approaches** to eliminating asset limits	**Administrative approaches** to eliminating asset limits	Addressing **implementation issues** after eliminating an asset test

Session 1: Introducing the Issue; Using Data to Make the Case

Introduction to Asset Limits

The authority to set and eliminate asset limits is shared by the federal and state governments. Asset limits in some programs, like Supplemental Security Insurance (SSI), are set federally, and states do not have the power to change them.

Who sets the rules for asset limits?

Federal government	Federally-authorized state flexibility
▪ Supplemental Security Income Program – asset test is $2,000/$3,000 ▪ Medicaid – no asset test	▪ Cash welfare (TANF) ▪ Food assistance (SNAP) ▪ Energy Assistance (LIHEAP)

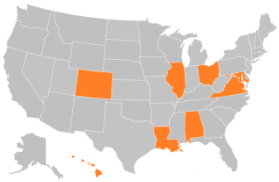
Up until this year, states had flexibility to set or eliminate their Medicaid asset tests. However, in January 2014, the Affordable Care Act required all states to eliminate Medicaid asset limits for parents, children, pregnant women and childless adults under 65 with incomes below 138% of the federal poverty level.[1]

States can set and eliminate asset limits in cash welfare (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF), food assistance (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP) and energy assistance (the Low-Income Energy Assistance Program, or LIHEAP). The majority of this learning group focused on removing asset limits from TANF and SNAP.

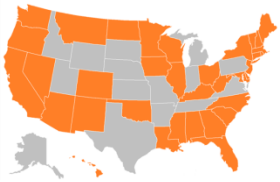
State Progress Eliminating Asset Limits

Since 1996, **eight states** have eliminated TANF asset limits and **36 states** have eliminated SNAP asset limits. Forty states have eliminated LIHEAP asset limits. Many other states have excluded important categories of assets from these limits in TANF programs, including 529 accounts, retirement accounts, vehicles and Individual Development Accounts.

8 states have eliminated the TANF asset test



36 states have eliminated the SNAP asset test



Using Data to Make the Case

Learning group participants discussed four types of data advocates can use to argue for eliminating asset limits.

Type of Data	Key Message	Examples
# of people denied benefits because they have assets in excess of the state's asset limit	Very few households are denied benefits due to assets. Therefore, eliminating the asset test won't result in a dramatic increase in caseload.	▪ In **Maryland**, an average of only .11% to .13% (between three and four people) was denied each month because they had assets in above the asset limit, between FYs 2007-2009. ▪ The **Illinois** Department of Human Services found that only eight out of 192,000 "checks" for assets at application and redetermination of benefits had assets over the $3,000 asset limit in 2012.[2] ▪ In **Louisiana,** only a total of four cases were closed due to excess resources in FY 2007-2008.[3] ▪ In **Alabama**, only 15 out of 21,429 TANF denials were due to excess resources in FY 2007-2008.[4]
% of applicants that have *any* resources; value of those resources	Few households have any assets and the ones that do have almost nothing.	▪ In **Arizona**, only 9.6% of TANF families have cash resources. Of those who do, the average amount of cash resources is only $139.40 (See footnote for data from all states).[5] ▪ Among the states that still have SNAP asset tests, the average SNAP household has only $331 in resources.[6]
Amount of emergency savings needed, derived from cost of living (e.g., Self-Sufficiency Standard or state equivalent)	The bare minimum that families need to save to be financially secure is *above* the state's asset test. (Use with caution. See below.)	▪ **Maryland** advocates derived the amount families need to save for one month of expenses ($2,228) from the state's Minimum Living Level, above the $2,000 asset limit. See case study below. ▪ Advocates have used Wider Opportunities for Women's Basic Economic Security Tables Index to derive amount needed for emergency savings. ▪ Advocates have used the threshold for liquid asset poverty ($5,887 for a family of four) to argue for increased limits savings.
Estimate of how much time it takes a caseworker to verify assets for each person	Eliminating asset limits reduces administrative burdens and can result in a cost savings for the state.	▪ The **Illinois** Department of Human Services estimated it takes 10 minutes for caseworkers to check assets on each case. The state estimated that eliminating the test would save the state $960,000 each year.[7] ▪ **Virginia** estimated it would spend around $127,200 in benefits for 40 additional families, but that this expense would be offset by $323,050 in administrative savings.[8] ▪ **Oklahoma** saved approximately $1 million in administrative costs when it eliminated its Medicaid asset test in 1997.[9]

Note of caution for using cost-of-living data: Cost of living or emergency savings data points with concrete thresholds might encourage policymakers to increase the asset limit to the threshold, rather than eliminate the asset test altogether. Any asset limit, no matter how high, discourages families from saving and cost the state unnecessarily.

Using Self-Sufficiency Data to Show Asset Limits are Too Low

Robin McKinney, Maryland CASH Campaign

Peer Case Study

Maryland CASH Campaign — Creating Assets, Savings and Hope

Maryland advocates used the Maryland Minimum Living Level—the state's version of a basic needs budget, similar to, but less generous than, the Self-Sufficiency Standard—to show how much families would need to save in order to be financially stable. Using this standard, a three-person family's monthly expenses total $2,228. Maryland's $2,000 TANF asset limit prevented families from saving for even one month of expenses, much less the three to six months recommended by financial professionals.

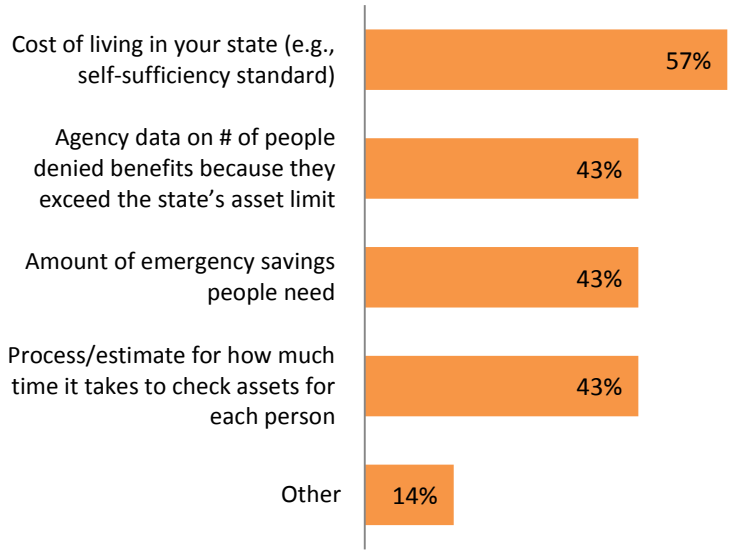
Maryland advocates also provided concrete examples of how the asset limit hindered families' ability to move off of benefits. For example, she pointed out that the limits prevented families from saving for security deposits for new apartments (often first and last month's rent), covering increased co-payments for child care and medical expenses, and increased food and transportation costs as they found jobs and increased earnings. The lack of any short-term or long-term savings kept families trapped on public benefits and unable to save for the future.

Maryland Minimum Living Level (MML) for TCA Household of (FY 2010)[3]

Family Expenses (family of 3)	1 month saved	3 months saved	6 months saved
Rent, Utilities & Household Furnishing	$877	$2,631	$5,262
Food	$470	$1,410	$2,820
Transportation	$107	$321	$642
Clothing, Cleaning & Personal Care	$141	$423	$846
Medical Care (1 Adult)	$57	$171	$342
Other Family Consumption	$56	$168	$336
TOTAL MML for Household of 3	**$1,708**	**$5,124**	**$10,248**
(Child care subsidy co-payment – 2 kids)	*$520*	*$1,561*	*$3,121*
TOTAL MML + Child care subsidy co-payment for 2 children)	**$2,228**	**$6,684**	**$13.368**

Learning Group Participant Experience

Learning Group Participants Were Asked What Data They Had Collected



Learning Group Participants' Experiences Using Data in Advocacy

"It's often faster to get data directly from the agencies, rather than through legislators."

"Working in a red state is difficult. There are value issues and deep-seeded philosophies around entitlements, which many people view as free money. I've received significant pushback from the Department of Children and Families when I've approached them about asset limits."

"Looking at TANF benefits, as an hourly wage can be a compelling way to show how little money TANF recipients really receive. For example, if translated into an hourly wage, TANF benefits amount to just $2.67 per hour with 30 hours of work a week. No one would jump through those hoops for so little money."

"In addition to quantitative data, I collected qualitative data and anecdotes from caseworkers."

Session 2: Developing Compelling Messages for Key Influencers

Depending on strategy, advocates will need to develop messages for a range of audiences—agency staff, individual legislators, committee staff and allied advocates. If *raising* awareness about the issue rather than flying under the radar is the right strategy, advocates also need to engage the media and use more public channels such as policy briefings, websites and social media. Not all of the messages below will resonate with all audiences. Advocates should test messages with key audiences and focus on the ones that resonate.

Key Messages that Have Resonated with Influencers

Assets, including savings, are central to household financial security.

- Research shows that assets are crucial to helping families escape poverty and climb the economic ladder.
- Accumulating and being able to pass assets on to the next generation is a key strategy for families to escape the cycle of poverty.
- Asset limits send the wrong message and discourage saving.
- Asset limits are confusing to caseworkers and recipients who, out of fear of losing benefits, avoid saving.

Eliminating asset limits can result in significant cost savings.

- Removing the requirement to verify assets reduces administrative burdens and cost and increases efficiency.
- Very few households are rejected because of the asset test. So, eliminating the asset test won't increase caseload.
- Experience from other states shows that eliminating asset limits can *save* over $1 million in administrative costs.
- Eliminating asset limits streamlines and simplifies program rules, aligns TANF/SNAP with other assistance programs and improves service delivery.

Asset limits are counterproductive to program goals.

- Reforming rules on asset limits is good public policy and consistent with state goals to encourage saving, promote self-sufficiency and reduce dependence.
- In light of TANF's emphasis on work, caseworkers should focus on helping people find employment and maintain their connection to the labor force. Workers need cars and savings to obtain and retain jobs, address emergencies and advance in the labor market.
- TANF's time limits and work requirements provide safeguards to make sure only those who are eligible receive benefits, making asset limits unnecessary.

Crafting Messages that Resonated and Responded to Policymakers' Concerns

Lucy Mullany, Illinois Asset Building Group

Peer Case Study

Illinois advocates began trying to eliminate the TANF asset test in 2009 through administrative rule. However, given the lack of success with administrative attempts, advocates decided to attempt to make the change through legislative measures. Going into the 2013 session, Lucy and her allies in the Illinois Asset Building Group mapped out a set of key messages to build support for the passage of the asset limits bill, which they used consistently with agency staff and legislators in both chambers. They focused on four key messages:

1. Asset limits are contrary to goals of the TANF program, as they prevent families from moving to self-sufficiency.
2. Asset limits cause families to deplete college savings or sell a car they need to get to work.
3. Asset limits do not promote good savings behavior.
4. Eliminating the TANF asset limit would save the state $1 million in administrative cost annually.

Advocates in Illinois refined their messages after learning which ones worked and which didn't. For example, they discovered that two of the original messages they tried did not resonate in Illinois: that other states have already eliminated asset limits, and that eliminating the TANF asset test would align the program with SNAP and Medicaid rules.

Responding to Policymakers' Concerns

Policymakers raised a number of concerns, which Lucy and her fellow advocates were able to address.

Concern 1: Aren't asset limits needed to ensure that only the truly needy receive assistance (i.e., to prevent fraud)?

Response:

Asset limits are leftover from the old Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) welfare policy; it is no longer needed since TANF has a strict five-year time limit and work requirements.

- TANF's stringent work requirements ensure only the truly needy will seek to be on the program.
  - TANF recipients now have to complete 30 hours of approved work-related activities per week in order to receive a grant.
  - A family of three in Chicago receives $432 a month, which amounts to $3.35 per hour of required work.
- The numbers support this argument—only eight cases were denied benefits due to assets over the asset limit in 2012.

Concern 2: Why should we make it possible for TANF recipients to save when people working and living paycheck-to-paycheck can't afford to save?

Response:

- This logic attempts to drive a wedge between the poor and the working class.
- Saving money is hard for everyone. We shouldn't erect barriers to saving for anyone, especially families on TANF who are working towards self-sufficiency.

Concern 3: Why not just raise the asset limit or carve out exceptions instead of eliminating the asset limit?

Response:

- We could raise the asset limit to $10,000 and/or exempt college savings or second car. But…
  - Then the state won't have $1 million in administrative savings.
  - We would still be sending the message that people on TANF shouldn't save.

Concern 4: It's not really a cost savings—the state isn't going to lay people off.

Response:

- No, but taxpayers will still save $1 million in wasted administrative expenses.
- Removing the TANF asset test frees up much needed time that could be better spent helping other families.

Advocates' Experiences with Asset Limits Messaging

"Excluding specific assets, like 529s, can be a good first step and way to introduce the concept to policymakers."

"Talking about the EITC and how low-income families are discouraged to save their refund resonated a lot with policymakers in my state."

"We were able to raise the vehicle asset limit by arguing that there is poor public transportation in the state and families need a vehicle to get to work."

"After two lottery winners continued to claim SNAP benefits, policymakers introduced legislation reinstating the asset test. Despite significant advocacy, we weren't able to change the policymakers' minds. They didn't care about any of our arguments; they just wanted to prevent another 'scandal.'"

Session 3: Legislative Approaches to Eliminating Asset Tests

One of the key decisions advocates need to make is whether to pursue reform through a legislative or administrative approach. Session 3 explored the pros and cons of the legislative approach.

Reform through a **legislative approach** is more likely to withstand changes of Administration. However, it may require more broad-based advocacy than an administrative strategy. Whereas administrative rules can change at the discretion of agency leadership, legislative change requires the introduction of new legislation, a majority vote, agreement by both chambers of the legislature and the Governor's signature. Note, however, that some states require approval of regulative changes by a legislative body.

Legislative advocacy has the potential to generate more public interest and media coverage than an administrative rule change, which, depending on political environment, may either help or hurt chances of success. If public sentiment and media coverage are positive, they may put pressure on legislators to eliminate asset limits. However, if public debate focuses on pejorative stereotypes or claims that people will take advantage of the system, it could persuade legislators to vote against removing limits.

An **administrative strategy** can be low-cost and often attracts less public attention than a legislative change. Further, a rule change usually only requires support from the agency and the governor's office. Another advantage to an administrative strategy is that organizations that are concerned about running afoul of "lobbying" restrictions (these concerns may be unfounded) can be reassured that administrative advocacy is not considered lobbying by the Internal Revenue Service. (State laws vary on whether administrative advocacy counts as lobbying. In some states, advocates may need to register as lobbyists).[10]

Legislative vs. Administrative Strategies

Legislative Approach

- Potential to generate more public interest and media coverage (could help or hurt)
- Often involves more votes and energy
- Requires support from both executive and legislative branches

Administrative Approach

- Can "fly under the radar" and generate less attention
- Requires support from agency and executive branch

Peer Case Study

Progress in a Challenging Political Climate: Raising the SNAP Asset Limit in Nebraska

Aubrey Mancusco, Voices for Children in Nebraska

voices for children IN NEBRASKA

Nebraska is a conservative state with a unicameral, non-partisan legislature. In 2011, Aubrey and other anti-poverty advocates joined together to introduce a bill to eliminate the SNAP asset limit. Although the political climate prevented them from completely eliminating the limit, they succeeded in increasing it to $25,000 and excluding certain asset classes other than liquid resources (e.g., money in a checking and savings account).

Before introducing the legislation, Voices for Children discussed the asset limit issue with Senators and other advocacy groups interested in anti-poverty policy during a pre-session meeting. The Senator that

introduced the bill had a strong understanding of the asset limit issue and a staff member who was a former asset limits advocate.

Unfortunately, after being introduced, the bill did not receive a "priority" designation, meaning the bill was unlikely to be considered by the full legislature. The bill was offered instead as an amendment to a SNAP outreach bill, which turned out to be a positive development because it allowed asset limit and SNAP supporters to advocate together for the SNAP outreach bill.

The initial floor debate on the amendment was largely negative and filled with "I know a guy…" stories about perceived abusers of public benefits, lottery winners still receiving SNAP, and general concern about waste, fraud and abuse. It was also clear that many Senators had a limited understanding of what the current program rules are. The Legislature adjourned before voting and debate continued the next day. The sponsoring Senator and advocates worked to reframe the debate by telling stories of hardworking Nebraskans and focusing on the improved government efficiency that would result from eliminating the SNAP asset test, which is usually a compelling argument in a conservative "small government" state like Nebraska.

Ultimately, some Senators were not comfortable with a full elimination of asset limits. In order to ensure that the amendment had enough votes to pass, it was revised to raise the SNAP asset limit to $25,000 and limit it to liquid resources.

Advice and Tips from Aubrey:

- **Spend a lot of time educating policymakers and staffers** prior to any floor debate. Asset limits are a tricky issue and if policymakers are not 100% clear on all the details, floor debate can quickly veer into unproductive conversations.
- **Make sure the introducing legislator is a "policy wonk" and knowledgeable about asset limits**. Although finding such a sponsor can be difficult to come by, Aubrey was fortunate to find a Senator and staff person familiar with the issue.
- **Gather actual data** from the human service department on number of fraudulent cases—especially when combating the "waste, fraud and abuse" arguments. The department should also have data on the number of case closures due to resources, which can be useful for estimating the cost. Aubrey used the small number of cases that were closed or denied due to the asset test to prove that eliminating the asset test would not result in a surge in caseloads. She also touted Nebraska's low error rate for assessing SNAP eligibility and the very small percentage of SNAP recipients that had been pursued for fraud to make the case that the SNAP program was serving the people it intended to serve.
- **Make sure you have multiple real stories** in your back pocket that can be used during the debate. These stories can help debunk myths about who would benefit from this policy change. Stories can be hard to come by, but if you have a relationship with unions for state workers or nonprofits providing direct services to clients, they can be valuable resources for story gathering.
- **Consider an amendment** as opposed to a stand-alone bill. Although the process is different in every state, asset limit provisions can be a good issue to offer as an amendment to other bills dealing with public benefits. Eliminating asset limits shouldn't have a significant fiscal impact, so including them as an amendment will not change the bill's fiscal requirements. Also, attaching the asset limit provision to a larger bill can help bring in support from other advocates.

Peer Case Study

Success with a Legislative Strategy in Illinois

Lucy Mullany, Illinois Asset Building Group

In Session 3, Lucy Mullany built on the messages discussed in Session 2 and focused on their legislative strategy in Illinois. (A more detailed version of this case study is available in the 2014 Asset Limits Scorecard Resource Guide.) Lucy and her allies pursued a two-fold strategy to eliminate the TANF asset test in 2013: first securing support from agency staff, and then building support for legislation in the House and Senate.

Step 1: Securing Support from Agency Staff

Before working with House and Senate staff, advocates first approached agency staff to get their input on the Illinois Asset Building Group's (IABG) plan to push for legislation to eliminate the asset test. It was important to get the Department of Human Services to agree with the bill's intent and language and to have a set of agreed-upon cost estimates on the impact of eliminating asset limits. Although agency staff supported IABG's advocacy efforts, the Department's official position on the bill was initially neutral. It was only after advocates put increased pressure on the Department and the cost estimate was made public that the Department became a proponent of the bill.

Agency staff were helpful in developing a cost estimate for the amount of administrative savings eliminating the asset limit would achieve. The Department estimated that the average caseworker spends 10 minutes checking assets on each case, meaning eliminating the asset test would save the state $960,000 per year from not having to verify the assets of applicants and existing TANF recipients. This cost estimate was essential to the eventual success of the legislation.

Step 2: Building Support in the House and Senate

Lucy and her allied advocates worked to get strong bill sponsors in both the House and Senate, securing the chairs of both the House & Senate Human Services Committees—which oversee the TANF program—as the chief sponsors. They also introduced two bills, anticipating the possibility that only one might make it through. Finally, they made a decision not to work with the media on the campaign and to keep efforts under the radar given widespread misconceptions about TANF and welfare recipients.

Before approaching House and Senate members, IABG developed a clear analysis of the political dynamics of both chambers. Because they were unlikely to get support from the more conservative House Democrats, they focused their advocacy on moderate Republicans. IABG made it a goal to get Republican co-sponsors and found that House Republicans were very receptive to their messages around savings. They were able to get a diverse group of co-sponsors—by party, gender, ethnicity and region.

The Senate had a different political landscape, with a large Democratic majority and strong ideological split between the two parties. Advocates knew they could not get the Republican vote, so they focused their Senate efforts on Democrats in conservative and swing districts who might be cautious of supporting something that could be perceived as "soft on welfare." They used the same basic messages stressing the positive value of savings. They already had a House vote on the bill, which helped advocates point to other representatives from the Senators' districts that supported the bill.

Ultimately, the bill passed by a margin of two votes in both chambers and was signed into law on June 29, 2013, by Governor Quinn.

Advice and Tips from Lucy:

- **Educate legislative staff**. Staff are important. They write bill analysis, are privy to party caucuses and private meetings, and draft amendments.
- **Get bill sponsors invested in legislation**. Engage them in strategy discussion and provide them with strong talking points that resonate with them personally for committee and floor debates.
- **Find an ally in leadership to help clear procedural hurdles** and guide the bill through the legislative process.
- **Know your parliamentary rules**, or partner with a seasoned advocate who does. Lucy worked with some veteran anti-poverty advocates who understood the rules well.

Advocates' Experiences with Legislative Advocacy

"Having the wrong person as a champion can really get in the way. Someone who is too liberal might ward off other legislators, and someone who isn't a policy wonk won't be able to answer technical questions."

"The (female) Republican co-sponsor of our bill was annoyed with the way her Republican colleagues were talking about women and their inability to save. She used this to rally other women in the caucus around the issue."

"We didn't work with media because they would draw too much attention to the bill. We actually went out of our way to steer reporters in a different direction."

Session 4: Administrative Approaches to Eliminating Asset Tests

In Session 4, Aleta Sprague from the New America Foundation shared highlights from research and interviews with state agency officials that her organizations conducted in 2012, and Robin McKinney from the Maryland CASH Campaign shared her story about eliminating asset tests via administrative channels.

Expert Presenter

State Agency Perspective on Asset Limits

Aleta Sprague, New America Foundation

In 2012, Aleta and her colleagues conducted research on agency perspective on asset limits. The highlights below are excerpted from the full report, available here. Aleta shared the following quotes from state agency officials.

Asset tests are complex and error prone.

- **Ohio**: "From radiation exposure compensation to Agent Orange settlements, to Japanese ancestry permanent resident survivors' benefits…there's just so many different exclusions [from the SNAP asset test]…so accuracy for that is hard."
- **Virginia**: "Elimination of TANF asset tests "simplified the eligibility process for both applicants and eligibility workers."

Asset tests are inefficient and divert caseworker time.

- **Ohio**: "Eliminating SNAP asset limits "allows workers more time to process other information regarding the assistance group and allows benefits to be approved in a more efficient manner."
- **Illinois**: "Removal of SNAP asset test has "greatly simplified the work for staff and reduced the amount of verifications the applicant is required to provide."
- **Colorado**: "Eliminating the TANF asset limit is estimated to save 10-15 minutes per case interaction; up to 90 minutes in first 45 days of new case."

Asset tests conflict with programs' mission.

- **Colorado**: "Asset limits really discourage savings that are necessary for individuals to become or stay self-sufficient. We often found that requiring income-eligible individuals to spend down their assets put them more in a vulnerable situation and really put more time on TANF … and actually caused more work for our county staff."
- **Louisiana**: "It did not make sense to have resources counted against a client when we [had] TANF programs encouraging them to save money to buy a house and send their kids to college."

The Complexity of Verifying Assets

Verifying a client's assets is an incredibly complex process. Caseworkers need to check many types of assets for each person and for each benefit the person receives. Rules differ by program, adding another layer of complexity. Not only is the process inefficient and time consuming, it also leads to errors.

Advocates have used these two flowcharts from Ohio to demonstrate how burdensome and labor intensive verifying assets can be for caseworkers. The first flow chart shows the process for assessing if the applicant's property produces income. The second flow chart shows the process for assessing which resources to exempt from eligibility calculations.

Peer Case Study

Working through Administrative Channels to Eliminate the Maryland TANF Asset Test

Robin McKinney, Maryland CASH Campaign

In 2009, unbeknownst to asset policy advocates, two Maryland legislators introduced bills to index asset limits to inflation and exclude retirement and education accounts. The legislators acted largely on their own, without support or research from Maryland CASH, other advocates or the Department of Human Resources (DHR). The results were messy: the hearings were confusing and filled with inaccuracies, DHR disliked the bill and refused to support it, and the bills eventually failed. This experience demonstrated how critical it is for policymakers and agency staff advocates to work together.

After the 2009 session, Maryland CASH worked with Catholic Charities, Maryland Catholic Conference and Maryland Budget & Tax Policy Institute to jointly build the case for removing asset limits. The advocates met with DHR to explain that previous legislation had been premature and to pitch why asset limits should be raised. The group of advocates supported the agency in three ways:

- Catholic Charities, which had an existing strong relationship with agency staff, worked with a contact within the DHR to get data on the number of clients denied due to the asset limit (see page 2 for more details on types of data).
- Advocates connected DHR staff to staff at the Virginia Department of Social Services to talk about administrative savings and address the unfounded concerns about "horror stories" of people with many assets claiming benefits. Virginia had eliminated its TANF asset test in 2003 through administrative rules, making it the perfect peer with which to compare notes.
- Advocates wrote a short document for DHR to make the case internally. The document showed that eliminating the asset test would (1) allow caseworkers to better use their time, (2) result in administrative savings, (3) not result in a flood of new applicants, (4) remove barriers to savings for TANF families and (5) align with a national trend.

DHR decided not to pursue change through legislation and felt they could be more effective through an administrative change. At the time there was litigation against DHR regarding a backlog of SNAP benefits that needed be paid. DHR included elimination of asset limits in their remediation plan to the court, arguing that eliminating the TANF asset test would free up caseworkers to better address the SNAP backlog. The Court agreed and DHR worked quickly to get approval from the Joint Committee on Administrative, Executive & Legislative Review, which is a committee of legislators that reviews agency regulations. The TANF asset limit was successfully eliminated in May 2010.

Advocates Experiences with Administrative Advocacy

"We've run into hostility with our Department of Children and Families. Turnover has also prevented us from building well-working relationships."

"Even though individual staff support removing the asset test, our human services agency does not want to pursue an administrative strategy. They are only comfortable with legislation, because they want support from the Governor and executive leadership."

"Pick an agency head you have the best relationship with and work with that person to reach the correct department. In Nevada, the Treasurer convinced the Human Services secretary to work on asset limits."

Session 5: Ensuring Effective Implementation of Asset Limit Policy Change

Key Implementation Issues to Consider

1. **Changes to policies, procedures and internal systems:** After eliminating an asset test, human services agencies must change the infrastructure of their internal systems, including changing their benefits program applications and forms to reflect the change. For example, in Illinois, the asset test was removed from paper applications. In the upcoming year, the agency will also roll out a new electronic application, which will not include the asset test.

   In Maryland, the Department of Human Resources issued an internal, official memo to make staff aware of the policy change. The Department also made changes to its Client Automated Resource and Eligibility System (CARES) to remove the asset test.

2. **New caseworker training**: The agency should ensure caseworkers understand the change and are receiving appropriate training. You can check in with your contacts at the agency and make sure this is actually happening.

3. **Leveraging the opportunity to tackle issues beyond asset limits:** During this process, you have likely built relationships with many staff members at your human services agency. Don't overlook the value of these relationships. Agency staff can be powerful thought partners, allies and "insiders" who you can work with on future financial capability programs and policies.

Resources

Examples of reports by state commissions

- Hawaii House Resolution 124: Requesting a Study on Asset Limits to Qualify for Public Assistance. State of Hawaii Department of Human Services, 2013. http://humanservices.hawaii.gov/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/2012-HR-124-Asset-Limit-Study.pdf
- Report on Uniform Asset Limit Requirements. Minnesota Children and Family Services Administration, 2013. www.assetsandopportunity.org/assets/pdf/Uniform_Asset_Limit_Requirements_Report_Final.pdf

Publications

- Dorn, Stand and Elizabeth Lower-Basch, *Moving to 21st Century Public Benefits: Emerging Options, Great Promise, and Key Challenges* (Washington, DC: Coalition for Access and Opportunity, May 2012). http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/publication-1/Moving-to-21st-Century-Public-Benefits.pdf
- Huang, Jin, Yunju Nam, and Nora Wikoff, *Household Assets and Food Stamp Program Participation among Eligible Low-income Households* (St. Louis, MO: Center for Social Development, 2010). http://csd.wustl.edu/Publications/Documents/WP10-28.pdf
- Smith, Vernon and Eileen Ellis, *Eliminating the Medicaid Asset Tests for Families: A Review of State Experiences* (Washington, DC: The Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001).

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- *Assets & Opportunity Scorecard*: http://assetsandopportunity.org/scorecard/
- New America Foundation Asset Limits: http://assetlimits.newamerica.net/

Network Learning Group on Asset Limits

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About this Publication

This *Lessons and Insights* brief was written by CFED's Ethan Geiling, Jennifer Brooks and Jennifer Medina. It summarizes and draws out highlights from each of the Learning Group sessions, which were held between November 2013 and March 2014. This Learning Group was co-developed by CFED and the Co-Facilitators and managed CFED. The authors thank Aubrey Mancuso and Aleta Sprague for sharing their experiences and wisdom, and are also indebted to Learning Group Co-Facilitators Robin McKinney and Lucy Mullany for their leadership, expertise and commitment to realizing the promise of the Assets & Opportunity Network.

About the Network

The Assets & Opportunity Network is a movement-oriented group of advocates, service providers, researchers, financial institutions and policymakers who implement strategies and advocate for policies that help people become more financially secure. It is a learning community that can speed up diffusion of innovative ideas and an advocacy community that increases participation in the policy process and, ultimately, our collective impact. Launched in 2012, the Network leverages the combined experience, power and potential of the assets field. It is staffed by CFED, guided by a nationally-representative Network Steering Committee and convened locally by 73 Lead State and Local Organizations, many of which host statewide or local asset coalitions.

[1] The ACA elimination of the asset test does not apply to seniors and people whose eligibility is based on disability.
[2] Illinois Asset Building Group (2013). "Illinois Votes To Eliminate The TANF Asset Test," http://www.illinoisassetbuilding.org/content/illinois-votes-eliminate-tanf-asset-test.
[3] Louisiana Department of Social Services (2008). "FITAP/KCSP Program - Cases Closed by Reason," http://www.dss.state.la.us/assets/docs/searchable/OFS/Statistics/Stats07-08/FITAP/fy0708_FITAP_Closure.pdf
[4] Alabama Department of Human Resources (2009). "FY 2008 Annual Report," http://dhr.alabama.gov/documents/Annual_Reports/AR08.pdf/
[5] 2011 TANF resources data: Table 14 (page 17, state and national) – the "cash resources" column shows that for the few TANF households with resources, the average amount of cash resources (cash on hand, bank accounts, certificates of deposit) is very low. Right now ACF has only released the appendixes for this report. When the full report comes out, there may be some additional explanation.
[6] See "Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2011," Table A.5 (page 41, national), U.S. Department of Agriculture, November 2012
[7] Illinois Asset Building Group (2013).
[8] Virginia Department of Planning and Budget, Economic Impact Analysis, Code of Virginia, Volume 22, Section 40-295-50 (2003).
[9] Smith, Vernon, Eileen Ellis, and Christina Chang (2001), *Eliminating the Medicaid Asset Test for Families: A Review of State Experiences.* Washington, D.C.: Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured, 2010, http://kaiserfamilyfoundation.files.wordpress.com/2001/04/2239-eliminating-the-medicaid-asset-test.pdf
[10] For example, in Maryland, executive branch lobbying still requires registration if it exceeds $500 in agency resources.