

**ACTION ITEM
BOARD OF SUPERVISORS**

DATE: December 16, 2008

TO: Board of Supervisors

FROM: Anthony Romanello, ICMA-CM
County Administrator



ISSUE. Discuss Support Legislative Initiatives Proposed by Social Action Linking Together (SALT) for 2008

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: N/A

BUDGET IMPACT: N/A

ATTACHMENTS: (1)

[1] SALT Information [] Reso/Ord/Proc #

[] [] Reso/Ord/Proc #

[] [] Reso/Ord/Proc #

REVIEW: [] County Administrator's Office _____

[] Legal _____

- Consent Agenda
- Discussion Item
- New Business

- Other Business
- Presentation

- Public Hearing
- Unfinished Business

PRESENTATION BY: Supervisor Paul Milde

ELECTION DISTRICT: N/A

November 15, 2008

The Honorable George H. Schwartz
Chairman, Stafford County Board of Supervisors
P O Box 339
Stafford, VA 22555-0339

Dear Chairman Schwartz

Throughout the Catholic Diocese of Arlington, Social Action Linking Together (SALT), now exceeds 1,000 advocates for faith based social justice. On behalf of SALT, I am writing again to request that the Stafford County Board consider including our SALT priorities in its 2009 legislative package. We appreciate and thank you for your past support and request your support again this year. SALT's 2009 General Assembly legislative priorities are

First, SALT joins the Virginia Coalition to End Homelessness (VCEH) in support of a pilot Rental Assistance Program, being funded at \$4.8 million jointly through TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) at no \$2.4 cost to TANF and \$2.4 million to the General Fund. Delegate Englin will introduce this measure. This program would provide funding to bridge the gap between one-third of a family's income and the Fair Market cost of housing. Working poor families who could not otherwise afford independent housing, such as women with children moving from welfare to work, or working families in shelters, would be priority targets in a 3-year pilot program. The program would provide time-limited assistance to families in order to provide the stability they need to advance in their work and achieve full independence. As their wages increase over the 3-year phase-in of the Federal Minimum Wage increase, their rental assistance would decline.

Second, Virginia families on TANF have received only one increase in their benefits over the past 23 years, a 10% increase in 2000. Meanwhile, inflation over that same period has equaled 93%. A family of three receives only \$320 per month in TANF benefits, less than a fourth of the federal poverty level. SALT urges a 10% increase in benefits for TANF recipients to be funded primarily from a federal block grant, and the indexing of future benefits to go into effect each time state employees' wages are raised.

Third, transitional assistance for former drug offenders is needed. SALT urges the General Assembly to end the lifetime ban on TANF benefits for otherwise eligible individuals who have been convicted of drug-related felonies. In its 2005 session, the General Assembly enacted legislation to lift the lifetime ban that had prevented these ex-offenders (unlike persons convicted of any other crimes) from ever receiving food.

stamps, even after they had paid their debt to society. We commend this action of the General Assembly. However, these individuals are still prevented from ever receiving TANF benefits. SALT believes it is critical to lift this lifetime ban as well, since it has the effect of punishing the ex-offender's family and hindering the person's successful re-entry into society upon release. In fairness to those affected, the ban on TANF benefits needs to be removed, as it has in 34 other States, including North and South Carolina, Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Florida.

Taken together these initiatives provide a real solution for low-income Virginians, who, in spite of their work, now are the majority in homeless shelters across the State—due to the gap between housing costs and their low wages. As a result, shelter stays are longer, and more and more people are being turned away from shelters that are filled with Virginia's working poor.

During the state fiscal crisis of the past several years, the federal TANF block grant was used as an informal "rainy day fund" to support programs that had previously been funded with state general fund dollars. We urge the return of TANF, so that TANF funds can be used for their intended purpose—to provide a safety net for poor children and to move families from welfare to economic self-sufficiency.

Your support again this year of our 2009 SALT legislative priorities and inclusion in your County's legislative package will be good not only for Virginia, but for our local community and especially for our most vulnerable citizens. We have been in contact with Governor Kaine and with state legislators who are willing to patron our bills.

Please let us know your decision and if you have any questions, feel free to call me at (703) 255-7074 or e-mail to jhorejs1@cox.net, or contact Florence Mittino an Stafford County resident and member of SALT at 1035 Aquia Drive, Stafford or at (540) 659-9910, e-mail at mrsm@adelphia.net

Sincerely,

John Horejs1
Coordinator, SALT
9610 Counsellor Dr
Vienna, VA 22181



SOCIAL ACTION LINKING TOGETHER

COST-OF-LIVING INCREASE FOR TANF BENEFITS

- < **SALT's 1,000 members and its advocacy partners* are calling for a 10 percent increase in benefits for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients next year and the following two years, to be funded primarily from the federal block grant, and for the indexing of future benefits to go into effect each time state employee's wages are raised. Such an increase is urgently needed to partially offset the projected 31 percent increase in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) since 2000, when payments were last adjusted.**
- < **The 10 percent COLA approved in 2000 was the only benefit increase that TANF families have received *since 1985*, compared to the CPI increase during that entire time of over 100 percent. A typical family of three now receives a mere \$3,840 per year, about a fifth of the Federal poverty level. *As a matter of basic fairness, we owe it to Virginia's needy families to restore at least a portion of the buying power they have lost to inflation.***
- < **TANF benefit levels matter because poverty harms children. Among many other disadvantages, poor children are much more likely to have health problems and developmental disabilities, and they are at much greater risk for abuse and neglect.**
- < **Assuming an average of 2 children per family, TANF benefits are currently supporting roughly 60,000 children in Virginia. Most of these children live with at least one parent, but about a quarter of them, roughly 15,000 children, live with a relative other than a parent. These relatives, especially grandparents, make tremendous sacrifices to care for these children and receive little support in doing so.**
- < **Consider two siblings aged 3 and 5 living in the Richmond area.**
 - < **If they live with a parent and are eligible for TANF, the family will receive a meager \$320 per month to get by on.**

- < **If they live with a relative other than a parent and are eligible for TANF, the family will receive even less in benefits, \$254 per month.**
- < **However, if they live in foster care, the foster family will receive \$918 per month to care for them.**

- < **This marked disparity effectively penalizes children who happen to be poor and/or are lucky enough to have a relative who cares about them. Moreover, it demonstrates how dramatically the cost to the state would escalate if children in TANF households were transferred to the foster care program.**

- < **Foster care support payments were increased by 15 percent in FY 2009. A comparable increase in TANF benefits is long past due. Even with a 10 percent increase for next year and the following two years, TANF benefits would lag far behind foster care payments.**

- < **The TANF caseload in Virginia has been reduced by 58 percent since the start of Welfare Reform in 1995 (from 70,797 families in June 1995 to 29,618 families as of May 2008), while Federal funding has remained constant. Thanks to this dramatic caseload reduction, Virginia has sufficient Federal TANF funds that could be used to pay for this modest benefit increase.**

* * * * *

* SALT's advocacy partners on this issue include AARP, the Virginia Catholic Conference (VCC), the Virginia Coalition to End Homelessness (VCEH), the National Association of Social Workers-Virginia Chapter (NASW-VA), the Virginia Poverty Law Center (VPLC) and the Fairfax County Alliance for Human Services (AHS)



SOCIAL ACTION LINKING TOGETHER

Transitional Assistance for Former Drug Offenders

2009 General Assembly Session

SALT applauds the 2005 Virginia General Assembly for eliminating the lifetime ban on food stamps for people with drug felony convictions. With Virginia CURE, SALT members worked to eliminate the ban on food stamps and benefits through Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). The elimination of the ban on food stamps is commendable, but the unjust ban on TANF benefits remains and must be removed to ensure those with drug felony convictions, a vulnerable population, receive the assistance to which they are entitled

Each year, Virginia releases roughly 10,000 men and women from its prisons. Seventy-five percent of them are parents of two or more children. All Virginians have a stake in the success of these families, since failure is likely to mean renewed cycles of poverty, substance abuse, physical abuse, and crime. Effective transitional assistance, on the other hand, leads to job training, treatment, and limited financial support for members of this population while they work to become self-sufficient.

SALT urges members of the General Assembly to support legislation that would lift the lifetime ban on TANF benefits for individuals convicted of a drug-related felony. This legislation is essential for the following reasons:

- The ban, while providing no meaningful deterrent to drug-related crime, unfairly punishes one group of former inmates who have paid their debt to society, and punishes their families as well
- Parents who are reentering their communities after incarceration often need public benefits to reunite their families, pay rent, and buy food, clothing, and other necessities. The denial of assistance to such parents as they attempt to rebuild their lives is counterproductive.
- The ban makes it extremely difficult for individuals to enter or complete substance abuse treatment programs, or maintain recovery from addiction. It limits the effectiveness of community-based treatment programs, which rely on their clients to use TANF benefits to help cover room and board expenses
- The ban interferes with the ability of ex-offenders to find work, return to school, or enter job training programs to gain essential skills to become competitive in the labor market
- TANF benefits provide a lifeline for women trying to escape domestic violence. Many women with drug-related convictions began using drugs as children when they were being physically or sexually abused. Providing them and their children with essential assistance enables them to avoid returning to an abusive environment.

BACKGROUND

Section 115 (a) of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, P L. 104-193, permanently bans individuals convicted of drug felonies from receiving TANF cash assistance or food stamps. However, section 115(d) of the Act allows states to opt out of this ban or modify it, and 34 states have done so. Virginia modified the ban in the most recent session of the General Assembly, removing the ban on food stamps.

SALT has worked repeatedly with Virginia C U R E to promote meaningful reentry programs for inmate parents and their children. We know from experience that incarcerated individuals who do not receive help with their transition back into society are more likely to return to a life of crime and, ultimately, prison.

*** SALT's advocacy partners on this issue include the Virginia Poverty Law Center (VPLC), the Virginia Interfaith Center (VIC) & Virginia CURE**



SOCIAL ACTION LINKING TOGETHER

SALT LEGISLATIVE PROPOSALS (SUMMARY)

2009 GENERAL ASSEMBLY SESSION

Social Action Linking Together, or SALT, has more than 1,000 advocates for faith-based social justice throughout the Catholic Diocese of Arlington. SALT supports a number of initiatives related to human services and encourages funding of the following initiatives in the 2010 budget. Together these initiatives address critical issues of poverty and homelessness in Virginia.

Rental Assistance SALT joins the Virginia Coalition to End Homelessness in support of a pilot Rental Assistance Program. This program would provide funding to bridge the gap between one-third of a family's income and the fair market cost of housing. Families who could not otherwise afford independent housing, such as women with children moving from welfare to work, or working families in shelters, would be priority targets in a 3-year pilot program. The program would provide time-limited assistance to provide the stability families need to advance in their work and achieve full independence. As their wages increase, their rental assistance would decline.

TANF Benefit Increase. Virginia families on Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) have received only one increase in their benefits over the past 23 years, a 10% increase in 2000. Meanwhile, inflation over that same period has equaled over 100%. A family of three receives only \$320 per month, less than a fifth of the federal poverty level. SALT urges a 10% increase in benefits for TANF recipients next year and the following two years, to be funded primarily from a federal block grant, and the indexing of future benefits to go into effect each time state employee's wages are raised.

Transitional Assistance for Former Drug Offenders. SALT urges an end to the lifetime ban on TANF benefits for otherwise eligible individuals who have been convicted of drug-related felonies. In its 2005 session, the General Assembly enacted legislation to lift the lifetime ban that had prevented these ex-offenders (unlike persons convicted of any other crimes) from ever receiving food stamps, even after they had paid their debt to society. However, these individuals are still prevented from ever receiving TANF benefits. SALT believes it is critical to lift this lifetime ban as well, since it has the effect of punishing the ex-offender's family and hindering the person's successful re-entry into society upon release.

Taken together, these initiatives provide a real solution for low-income Virginians, both those who need temporary assistance while moving to work and those who have jobs but whose wages are insufficient to pay for housing. In fact, people with jobs make up the majority in homeless shelters across the State. As a result, shelter stays are longer, and more and more people are being turned away from shelters that are filled with Virginia's working poor.

SALT advocates urge your full support of our SALT legislative proposals by including them in the 2010 budget. For more information contact SALT Coordinator John Horejsi at jhorejsi@cox.net or visit the SALT web site at www.S-A-L-T.org

BUDGET AMENDMENT FOR RENTAL ASSISTANCE

The Virginia Coalition to End Homelessness and SALT requests a \$2.4 million budget amendment to be matched by TANF funding for a total of \$4.8 million to create a pilot program to provide rental assistance to fill the gap between income and housing costs for working poor families and individuals.

The program would provide rental assistance to fill the gap between 30% of an eligible family's income and Fair Market Rent. The expectation is that the assistance would decline as the family's income (and housing contribution) increases which would allow for additional households to enter the program.

Example

The Smith family earns \$1257/month¹. Their housing budget is \$377.² Fair Market Rent average cost for a 2 bedroom apartment in Virginia is \$941.³ Rental Assistance, equal to the difference between their housing budget and Fair Market Rent, would be \$564/month.

It is estimated that 750 families (over 2000 people) could be served through a \$4.8 million pilot project in the first year, and that the cost per family for rental assistance would be less than the cost of emergency shelter over the same period.

Preference would be given to families leaving welfare for work and working families and individuals unable to leave shelter due to the difference between their housing budget and area rents.

The Department of Housing and Community Development could manage this pilot project through its existing Homeless Intervention Program (HIP) sites, minimizing administrative costs, preventing the need for additional bureaucracy, and ensuring that funds go directly to families and individuals in need.

Built into the project will be rigorous, appropriate and ongoing accountability mechanisms to evaluate whether the program is effectively moving Virginia families from welfare to economic independence through work, supporting working families and individuals in moving from shelter to independent housing, and complying with TANF regulations.

¹ Hourly wage \$7.25, VA minimum wage 7/09

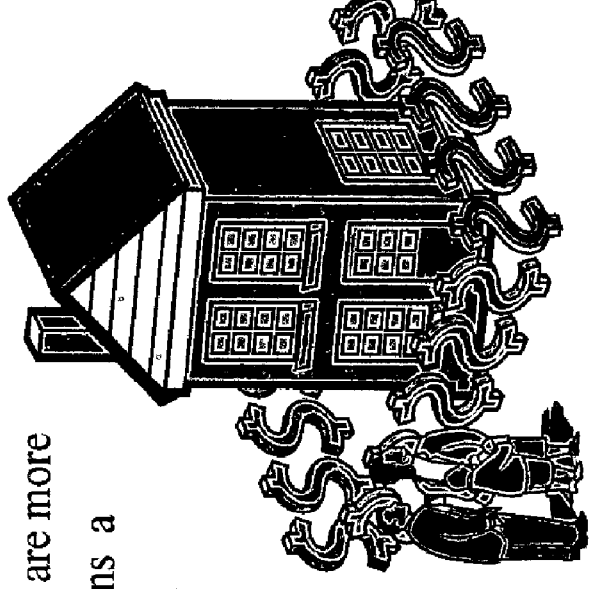
² National standard for housing budget, one-third of income, HUD, 2008

³ FMR for 2 bedrm apt in VA, Out of Reach, Nat'l Low Income Housing Coalition 2008

Last year, 80,681 Virginians asked for shelter.

51,315 were turned away.

Across the Commonwealth, shelters and transitional housing programs are filled to overflowing. Most of the 29,366 people served by shelters and transitional housing programs in 2007 had jobs—and most of their jobs were full-time. But these workers do not earn enough to afford the high costs of housing. National standards suggest a household cannot sustain housing costs that are more than 30% of income—in Virginia, this means a minimum wage worker would have to work 100 hours per week to afford a two-bedroom apartment! Thousands of working poor people—and more than 7500 children—are trapped in Virginia's shelters and transitional programs. Which means 51,315 other people are locked outside.



Rental Assistance bridges the growing gap between wages and housing costs. Rental Assistance helps working people move out of shelters and transitional housing programs, and helps others move into shelter, and off the streets.