

Benefit Cliff Mitigation in the District of Columbia

THE SPARK

The District of Columbia recognized significant cliff effects impacting families, particularly those receiving multiple benefits such as housing, medical, childcare, TANF, and SNAP. Feedback from residents, businesses, and community partners highlighted the barriers these cliff effects posed to economic mobility and stability, sparking DC's initiatives to address them. The high cost of living in the District requires larger income gains for residents to succeed, prompting DC to test and refine more comprehensive strategies to meet this challenge.

INITIATIVES

TEP Redesign

The [TANF Education and Employment Program \(TEP\)](#) was redesigned to include a two-generational framework and enhanced incentives for milestones related to employment, education, and participation in two-gen activities. These incentive payments are designed to support a whole-family approach to helping participants reach their full potential, and can be received for completing certain milestones, such as reading to their child, getting a library card, job placement, promotions, and retaining employment. These supports and incentive payments are complimented by significant TANF earnings disregards and transitional benefit extensions for childcare, Medicaid, and SNAP that reduce benefits cliffs for participants. The program also now includes a Family Choice Model with the option for a self-directed version where participants can document their work-related activities and receive support as needed in achieving their goals.



Career MAP Pilot

The [Career MAP Pilot](#) was designed to alleviate cliff effects by providing a combination of rent discounts and cash payments that offset the losses of medical, childcare, TANF, and SNAP benefits due to earnings. This initiative required standalone legislation and state regulatory changes to launch, initially funded through American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars. Extensive collaboration with the [Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta](#) for modeling and analysis, and the [Lab @ DC for Research and Evaluation](#), supported the program's implementation. The Career MAP Pilot aims to maintain housing stability and support significant income growth for families.

Program Design: Pillars of Career MAP

Household Resources	Career Advancement	Family Support
		
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Maintains minimum level of household resources, including housing subsidy, for up to 5 years• Holds harmless for earned income increases to remove disincentives to earning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Robust career advising and customized income growth plan• Focus on high-demand sectors and industries• Advancing through career pathway to middle class	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 2-generation, whole-family case management• Holistic approach to case management including life skills such as financial literacy

"The thought was, if we really want to give families a chance to advance, and not just exit a program... we needed to do something to take away penalties to work."

- Geoff King, Program Manager, Career MAP Pilot at DC Department of Human Services

FINER DETAILS

Funding

Initial funding for the Career MAP Pilot came from the federal Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) program authorized by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), transitioning to District funding in the current fiscal year and beyond. Ongoing support for TEP comes from a mix of federal and District funds.

Key Collaborators

The DC Department of Human Services (DC DHS) administers the programs highlighted here. DHS collaborated with key partners to advance these changes. The Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta provided modeling and analysis for the Career Map Pilot and customized [CLIFF tools](#) for DC's unique benefit structure. The Lab @ DC conducted research, evaluation, and civic design work to support program implementation and effectiveness. TEP's two-generational redesign was informed by the Aspen Institute's work, and also included extensive feedback from families participating in TANF and providers to make sure the program best met their needs. Ongoing collaboration between DHS and the District's Workforce Investment Council (state and local workforce board), Department of Employment Services, and other education and training partners under the Deputy Mayor for Education is also important for career connections and skill building.

TIMELINE

The foundation for these changes in DC began years earlier. See below for a high-level timeline of events.

