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November 29, 2001

The Honorable Tommy G. Thompson
Secretary of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Thompson:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the upcoming reauthorization of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program and the coordination of TANF with other federal benefits programs. The California State Association of Counties (CSAC) and County Welfare Directors Association of California (CWDA) are pleased to submit the attached comments regarding TANF Reauthorization.

As you know, states and counties have done a tremendous job implementing the first phase of welfare reform. The task of changing welfare from an open-ended benefits program to a time-limited program of work and work supports has been difficult but rewarding. In California, we have seen significant caseload declines and a growing proportion of working adult recipients. The state is spending more of its funds on supportive services than ever before.

Despite these successes, welfare reform is not yet complete. Our working adult recipients often do not earn enough to be self-reliant. Many of the families remaining on the caseload have multiple barriers to employment, such as mental illness, substance abuse, domestic violence, a lack of education and training, and poor English proficiency. Counties are learning how to address the needs of these recipients. At the same time, the softening economy is causing the number of applications for assistance to increase. Anecdotally, several of our counties report higher numbers of people requesting aid over the past few months, many of whom are new to public assistance. These applicants commonly cite job loss as the reason they are seeking help. States and counties will need to target resources toward helping these more experienced workers find new jobs.

All of these continuing challenges indicate the need to maintain or increase the federal and state funding available for TANF. Additionally, it is vital to preserve the flexibility that the federal law gives states and counties to design programs that address local problems and priorities.

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The attached CSAC/CWDA policy on TANF Reauthorization lists a number of additional recommendations in several key areas. We hope that you find these comments useful as you prepare the Administration's reauthorization proposal.

If you have questions, please feel free to contact either of us or our federal representatives: Joe Krahn, Waterman & Associates (CSAC) at 202-898-1444 and Pat Craig (CWDA) at 202-466-0001. We look forward to working with your department to further refine the recommendations as the Reauthorization package takes shape.

Sincerely,

Steven C. Szalay
CSAC Executive Director

Frank J. Mecca
CWDA Executive Director