

News By [Kaela Roeder](#) June 21, 2023

## A new guaranteed income pilot launches in DC

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A new program is providing no-strings-attached monthly cash assistance to Black mothers with children involved in the child welfare system.

Mothers living with their children and who have a current or recently open case with a social worker are eligible to receive \$500 per month for three years under Mother Up, a community-funded cash assistance managed by the local nonprofit, Mother's Outreach Network. Unlike many other social safety net programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, this program provides assistance without requiring participants to



“It’s intended to give families the support that they need to stay together to prevent their involvement in the system, but also to address the real needs that they have,” said Melody Webb, co-founder of Mother’s Outreach Network.

A “soft launch” of the program began recently, and five mothers started receiving payments in May. Additional cohorts will begin receiving funds later this year. While Mother Up is currently community-funded, Mother’s Outreach Network hopes to raise awareness of the utility of the project among local, state and federal governments, which in turn could explore the creation of more government-funded guaranteed income programs.

## What is guaranteed income?

Guaranteed income programs provide unconditional cash assistance, often to people living below the [federal poverty line](#) — \$24,860 for a family of three in 2023. Usually, programs target a specific demographic and provide payments for a set amount of time.

Various communities across the United States, including Baltimore, Houston and Chicago, have launched similar initiatives with varying success. In the past few years, D.C. has also seen this model grow locally, with various nonprofits partnering to support [District families](#) with cash assistance, including [THRIVE East of the River](#) and [Strong Families, Strong Futures DC](#).

Many programs began during the pandemic, which revealed how vulnerable many people are to poverty, Webb said. The stimulus payments demonstrated how direct economic support can be effective in helping families meet their basic needs, she added.

“It’s good for the individual, it’s good for their family, community and in fact, the entire economy,” Webb said.

The majority of people who received the first round of stimulus checks during the pandemic used the money for household expenses like food, rent and utilities, according to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#). For the later payments, many saved the money or used it to pay off debts, per a [survey](#) from the New York Federal Reserve.

In her time as a parents' defense attorney, Webb said she often saw D.C. remove children from families for reasons largely related to poverty. Poverty alone is not a legal reason to remove a child from their parents.

But poverty is, time and again, conflated with neglect, Webb wrote in an [article](#) for the Columbia Journal of Race and Law. Involvement in the child welfare system is often linked to economic status, race and having a single mother, according to the report. For example, about [79% of children in the foster system in the District are Black](#), while 52% percent of children in D.C. are Black. Neglect is the main reason why children are removed from households in D.C., according to oversight responses from the Child and Family Services Agency.

No-strings-attached payments can aid families involved in the child welfare system, Webb said. And the pilot is focused on helping Black mothers specifically because "they're the most vulnerable mothers," Webb said.

"That's what we need, and doing it in a way that sort of helps support the dignity and the fulfillment of that person in their humanity," Webb said.

A similar program, [The Magnolia Mother's Trust](#) in Jackson, Mississippi, has shown programs like this work, Webb said. The Magnolia Mother's Trust, created by the nonprofit Springboard to Opportunities, began offering cash payments to single mothers in the fall of 2018. This program was one of the inspirations that drove Webb to start Mother Up.

According to an [impact report](#) organized by The Magnolia Mother's Trust, mothers felt less stressed, happier and generally experienced a better quality of life after being involved in the program. Participating mothers went back to school and were hired for better-paying jobs.

The Magnolia Mother's Trust also put a dent in the narrative that poverty is a flaw of the person, not of the structural inequality, Webb said. She also hopes to dismantle this misconception through her work with Mother Up.

"Once we remove a notion of it — poverty being sort of result of a personal flaw — then we are kind of liberated to think about really important structural solutions," she said.



High's oldest daughter was removed from her home when she was four. She said a false allegation was filed against her — she doesn't remember what the particular claim was, but suspects a big driver of the allegation was that she was low-income. It took High over a year to get her daughter back, the time filled with court dates and bureaucracy.

While trying to get her daughter back into her custody, High said she was repeatedly stigmatized by government actors because she was a poor Black woman.

"It's not my fault that I'm poor," High said she remembers thinking.

High knew she had to be a part of the community advisory board when Webb approached her, she said, because of her lived experience.

Community input has like High's been at the forefront of the pilot. Early on in its development, Webb put together a focus group of mothers to get their perspectives on what would be most helpful and effective.

"Our work has been rooted in really measuring the need based on what the community tells us," Webb said.

*Sign up to learn more about Mother Up [here](#).*

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