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Restore Strong Families, Strong Futures

Washington DC must restore the District's only publicly-funded guaranteed income program, Strong Families, Strong Futures (SFSF), and expand SFSF citywide to reach all new mothers.

The SFSF DC pilot was launched in January 2022 by Mayor Muriel Bowser and the DC Office of the Deputy Mayor of Planning and Economic Development (DMPED) to address the financial insecurity faced by new and expectant mothers in Wards 5, 7, and 8.¹ In partnership with nonprofit Martha's Table, the public-private initiative provided direct cash assistance, enabling mothers to manage essential expenses while navigating the financial challenges of early parenthood.²

Raising a newborn comes at a steep financial cost. A September 2021 LendingTree report estimates that parents spend \$29,000 annually on necessities like housing, food, transportation, insurance, and daycare.³ On average, families dedicate \$300 per month to diapers, wipes, formula, and other infant essentials.⁴ The strain of these costs negatively affects maternal stress levels and health outcomes, reinforcing the urgent need for direct financial support.

Financial insecurity is widespread in DC. In 2023, 33% of households fell below the ALICE threshold, struggling to afford basic necessities despite employment. Poverty rates in the city rose from 12% in 2022 to 13% in 2023, highlighting worsening economic conditions.⁵ With DC's rising cost of living—now 53% above the national average—economic insecurity continues to deepen, particularly for new and expecting mothers in Wards 5, 7, and 8. While Ward 5's median income (\$98,326) aligns with the citywide median of \$98,916, economic hardship is far more severe in Ward 7 (\$49,814) and Ward 8 (\$45,598)—both significantly below the DC median.⁶ Families in these wards face higher rates of food insecurity, infant mortality, and a lack of affordable housing. As financial pressures grow, programs like SFSF are more critical than ever, providing direct cash assistance to families who need it most. While Wards 5, 7, and 8 face some of the city's starkest disparities, focusing solely on those wards risks overlooking mothers in other wards who are also struggling—especially where higher median incomes mask neighborhood-level hardship. Ensuring SFSF's restoration and citywide expansion will help stabilize households across all eight wards, improve maternal and infant health outcomes, and reaffirm DC's commitment to economic justice for all.

Authorized by the Fiscal Year 2022 Local Budget Act of 2021, SFSF is a \$1.5 million direct cash transfer pilot created to support maternal health and economic mobility for new and expectant mothers.⁸ By providing unrestricted cash payments, the program aimed to reduce financial stress, improve maternal and infant well-being, and ensure families had the flexibility to make decisions best suited for their needs. Mayor Bowser announced a second round of direct cash assistance in April 2024, targeting expectant mothers and mothers of children under three.⁹ The program received \$1 million in FY 2024, and her FY 2025 budget proposal allocates an additional \$1 million, covering the third year of financial assistance.¹⁰

The April 2024 cohort includes 118 mothers, with more than half living in Ward 8—underscoring the program's focus on communities disproportionately affected by economic hardship.¹¹ As DC's rising cost of living and economic inequality persist, SFSF remains an essential investment, ensuring mothers receive the financial stability necessary to support themselves and their children.

Martha's Table's Technical Brief on Strong Families, Strong Futures (SFSF) confirms that direct cash assistance empowers families to meet essential needs and plan for long-term stability. Among participants, 75% used funds for food, housing, and transportation, while 47% built savings to ensure financial security beyond the program's duration.¹² Strategic spending strengthened economic mobility—33% invested in employment, 33% in education, and 16% in healthcare.¹³ Affordability improved across key expenses, with reductions in transportation, utility, and grocery insecurity. Health outcomes also improved, with "excellent health" reports rising from 20% to 28%. Despite rising costs in DC, families demonstrated financial adaptability, reinforcing the lasting benefits of direct cash support.¹⁴

Guaranteed income programs disrupt cycles of poverty, providing flexibility and security that traditional welfare programs often fail to offer. As DC's cost of living continues to rise, restoring Strong Families, Strong Futures is more critical than ever. We urge you to support the restoration of SFSF to ensure that DC mothers receive the financial stability necessary to support themselves and their children.

For a full list of references, please refer to our website.