

WORKFIRST

Individual Responsibility Plans (IRPs)

Introduction

This publication explains how an IRP is created so that you can get the best possible plan for yourself.

What is an Individual Responsibility Plan (IRP)?

An Individual Responsibility Plan is an agreement between you and DSHS. It does two things:

- it says what you must do to work, look for work, or get ready for work through required participation in the WorkFirst program, and
- it tells what help DSHS will give you to meet these goals.

Your IRP makes a plan for moving you into employment as soon as possible. The process of making your plan should include:

- screening you for skills and problems;
- referring you to appropriate programs; and
- making changes over time to reflect changes in your participation in the WorkFirst program.

You and your WorkFirst case manager at DSHS must both sign the IRP:

- when it is first written and
- at any time that you make changes to it.

The IRP should be in your primary language. You should get a signed copy of your IRP and keep it with your other DSHS papers.

What does an IRP say?

Your IRP must state the following:

- Information about your WorkFirst activities. Most people must participate “full-time.” DSHS defines “full-time” as 32-40 hours per week. But the IRP will not specify the number of hours you must do each activity. Instead, it will list your activities as “full,” “1/2” or “1/4” time activities;
- Any specific requirements related to the WorkFirst activity (examples: learning English, getting counseling or other treatment);
- The services that you need to participate (examples: helping you pay for child care, transportation, and other supportive services);
- Who to contact if you cannot get to one of your required activities;
- Information about what will happen if you do not do your required activities or have unexcused absences (see our publication called [WorkFirst Sanctions](#)); and
- Your agreement to get and keep a job as soon as possible.

What kinds of activities will be in my IRP?

Job Search

You must participate in Job Search as your first WorkFirst activity unless you are temporarily “deferred” (meaning your

participation in Job Search is delayed). Job Search is supposed to help you find and keep a job.

You begin by taking a 5-day workshop. Next is the longer Job Search process. This takes between 2 and 12 weeks. Job Search may include pre-employment training to help you learn skills you need for an entry-level job that pays more than average entry-level wages. During these weeks, you will be actively looking for a job. You must keep a written record of all job contacts.

By the end of the first four weeks, a caseworker (probably at the Department of Employment Security) will decide whether you should stay in job search. Job search will end when:

- you find a job; or
- you are “deferred;” or
- the caseworker decides you need more skills or experience to find a job; or
- you have not found a job after 12 weeks.

If after 12 weeks of job search you have not found a job, your WorkFirst case manager will do an “employability evaluation” by asking you questions to find out why you have not got a job yet. You and your case manager will use this information to change your IRP to include other activities to help you become employable (see below).

You may be able to get a **deferral from job search** if:

- You are working 32 hours or more a week for pay;
- You are under 18 and have not finished high school or GED; under 20 and go to high school, or its equivalent, full time; or any age and attend a Washington state

community or technical college at least half-time and work at least 16 hours a week in a work study program (our publication [TANF and WorkFirst for College Students](#) has more information); or

- Your “situation” keeps you from looking for a job. Examples: you are unable to look for a job while you have physical or mental health problems, are homeless, and/or dealing with family violence.

Your caseworker is supposed to ask you questions to determine whether you have problems that you need help with before you can participate. If you have physical or mental problems that make participation hard for you, your caseworker should make sure you get a “full assessment” to determine what help you need. **You must tell DSHS about any disability issues,** and ask for a deferral from job search (if needed) and help in addressing them.

◆ If DSHS refuses to make adjustments or “accommodate” a physical or mental disability and insists you have to go to job search, it may be violating your rights under the [Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#). Contact a legal services office right away! (Our publications [DSHS Help for People with Disabilities](#) and [WorkFirst and the Family Violence Amendment](#) have more information.)

Other Activities

DSHS may decide that the fastest way to get you working is to have a training activity in your IRP. Examples of training activities include:

- Basic education (ESL, GED, or literacy classes). You must combine these with job search, paid employment, or unpaid employment;
- Vocational education at an accredited school for up to 12 months that leads to a degree or certificate for a specific occupation, if you work at least 20 hours per week and you cannot get the training in any other way. WorkFirst can pay for your tuition, books, and other education costs if this education is in your IRP and there no other way to pay for them;
- Customized job skills training, under rules similar to those for vocational education;
- Work experience for up to 9 months (unpaid work for a non-profit or government association);
- Temporary “Community Jobs” where the State pays for you to work at a job for up to 9 months;
- Community service, which can be either “structured” (unpaid work for a charitable non-profit or government organization) or “unstructured” (includes work benefiting your family or community, such as caring for disabled family members);
- On-the-job training (you are paid for attending job-related training) if you lack skills demanded in the local labor market;
- Full-time participation with DVR (Department of Vocational Rehabilitation);
- Full-time seasonal worker training;
- Parenting and life skills education;
- Volunteer work at a licensed day care, preschool, or elementary school;
- In-patient drug and alcohol treatment;
- Activities to relieve crisis situations (examples: homelessness, mental health issues, domestic violence); and
- Paid employment leading to increased employability (50% of your gross wages are not counted in determining the amount of your TANF grant).

Services

DSHS will provide extra services if there are circumstances making it hard or impossible for you to meet your IRP requirements. If you need help with child care or transportation (including car repairs), you must let your case manager know so that you can add these services to your IRP. Other supportive services that may be available to you include

- Substance abuse treatment;
- Domestic violence counseling;
- Medical care and evaluations;
- Special work accommodations for those with special needs;
- Tools and uniforms; and
- Diapers for your child in day care while you work or look for work.

◆ DSHS may set a limit on the amount of support services you may get.

What kind of job must I accept?

As a WorkFirst participant, you normally must take the first job offered to you. There are exceptions to this rule.

You do not have to accept any job that:

- provides no workers comp;
- is available due to a strike;
- interferes with your religion; or
- violates any health or safety standards.

Also, the job must pay minimum wage or more, and the employer must provide the same benefits for its WorkFirst employees that it does for its other workers.

For unpaid employment, you will not have to participate for more hours than would equal the amount of your TANF grant divided by the minimum wage.

How can I get the IRP that is best for me?

DSHS must involve you in creating your IRP. You have the right to help develop your IRP. You and your case manager should work together in selecting activities and services. Tell your case manager any specific plans you might have. Tell your case manager about the things that you think you need to get a job, such as help with child care and transportation. Make sure the IRP takes into account your particular circumstances in setting your hours of participation.

Also, you must tell your DSHS caseworker about any physical or mental health issues faced by you or a family member and about any domestic violence issues that make it hard for you to participate. DSHS must make adjustments to your IRP to accommodate these issues. If they will not, call a legal services office.

What if I do not agree with my IRP?

Suggest some changes. If your case manager will not make those changes, do not sign the IRP. Ask to speak with a supervisor. If you cannot resolve the problem with a supervisor, you have the right to request a fair hearing.

Your IRP is a flexible document. You can review it at any time either you or your case manager feels necessary. It should change as needed to make sure the plan continues to meet your needs in finding and keeping a job.

If you are unhappy with your IRP and have been unable to resolve the problem on your own, get legal help.

◆ If you are low-income and live outside King County, call CLEAR at 1-888-201-1014. If you live in King County, call the King County Bar Association's Neighborhood Legal Clinics at (206) 267-7070 between 9:00 a.m. and noon, Monday – Thursday, to schedule a free half-hour of legal advice.

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