



WorkFirst For Those Who Don't Speak English

The purpose of this publication is to help you make WorkFirst work best for you if you or someone in your family does not speak English. For more details about welfare benefits and your rights, please ask your legal services office or social worker for the other pamphlets mentioned below.

What should I do if I need welfare benefits and I don't speak English?

If you do not speak English well, the welfare office is required to provide you with an interpreter so that you have the same access to cash, food and medical services as an English speaker. Be sure to mark on the application form if you have difficulty in reading, speaking or understanding English. The welfare office should provide you with a free interpreter without delay. The office should also send you translated notices about your benefits so that you can read about your rights and responsibilities in your own language. Keep a copy of the letters the welfare office sends you. When you take information to the office, ask them to make a copy for you to keep and stamp the date on both copies. If you have not received interpreters or notices in your own language and the welfare office has cut off your benefits, it may be that they will have to give you back your benefits.

Do I have to participate in WorkFirst even if I don't speak English?

Yes, you must participate in WorkFirst. The welfare office policy is that even if you don't speak English, you may be able to get a job. However, if the welfare office wants you to attend job orientation classes or call employers to ask for interviews, the office must provide you with interpreters and translated materials to help you with these activities. If the welfare office refers you to another agency for these services, that agency must help you with interpreters and translated materials. In addition, the welfare office will soon refer all limited English speakers to an agency that will give you a test to determine your English level so that you may qualify for English as a Second Language classes and additional services. Be sure to ask the office to have your English level tested.

Can I go to English as a Second Language (ESL) classes before I look for a job?

Yes, if your English level is low. Once your English language skills have been tested on a test called the CASAS test, you will be assigned a skill level.

- If you have little to no English skills you are considered to be *non-proficient* and you can receive intensive ESL for up to one year. This intensive ESL will be combined with job search activities which may increase as your English improves.
- If your English level is considered *emerging* or very limited, you will receive some ESL instruction combined with work activities.
- Finally, if you have a *basic* or limited command of English, you will begin with assisted job search and then move to other approved services in a bilingual setting. In that case you can still ask for ESL classes to be provided to you after you have started working so that you can improve your skills to help keep your job or get a better one.

Can I also get help with training if I need to get some skills or experience so that I can get a job?

Yes, but job training may only be provided **before you start working** if you can show you cannot get a job with your current level of skills and experience. You may also be eligible to get some help with training **once you start working** if you can show that you are already working 20 hours a week or more and need the training to improve your skills to get a better job.

What if I disagree with the activities the Welfare office is asking me to do?

If you disagree with the activities you are being asked to do, you should either tell your worker you want a Fair Hearing or ask for a copy of the Hearing Request form to fill out. (See our pamphlet on *Fair Hearings* for more information) You should also contact a legal services office for advice. You are entitled to have a plan, called an Individual Responsibility Plan, which sets out the ESL, job search and training activities you are eligible for. (See our pamphlet on “*Individual Responsibility Plans*” for a description of these plans and how you can ask for services.) If you cannot look for a job or attend training because you cannot find childcare, because you or a family member are sick or disabled, or because you are experiencing family problems such as domestic violence, **you may be eligible to delay or cancel your participation in Work First.** (Please see our other pamphlets “*WorkFirst and The Family Violence Amendment*” and “*WorkFirst for Families with Special Needs*” for more information.)

What if I am told I am not eligible for services because of my immigration status or because I have a sponsor?

If you are told you are not eligible for benefits because of your immigration status or because you have a sponsor, it is a good idea to check with a legal services office or other advocate to see if the welfare office is correct. Many new laws have changed the eligibility of some immigrants for benefits, but most legal immigrants **ARE still** eligible for benefits. Because these rules are complicated the welfare office staff may have made a mistake. Ask to see the rule that applies to your situation and speak with a supervisor, or check with a legal advocate before you give up hope of receiving any assistance.

Can receiving public assistance prevent me or my family members from getting a green card (legal permanent residence)?

No, not in most cases. That's because most of the benefits available to immigrants before they get their green cards are non-cash benefits like medical coupons or food stamps, which will not affect eligibility for a green card. If you are getting cash assistance and do not yet have a green card, or if you want more information on this issue see our pamphlet "*Will Using Benefits Hurt My Chances of Getting a Green Card or Becoming a U.S. Citizen?*"

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This publication provides general information concerning your rights and responsibilities. It is not intended as a substitute for specific legal advice. This information is current as of the date of its printing, December 2000.

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