

# TANF and WorkFirst for College Students

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- ❖ Read this only if you live in the state of Washington.
  - ❖ You can find all the fact sheets we link to here at [WashingtonLawHelp.org](http://WashingtonLawHelp.org).
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## Introduction

If you get TANF and want to go to college, you probably have to do WorkFirst to keep getting TANF. DSHS could excuse you temporarily from doing WorkFirst. If they do not, you must take part in a WorkFirst activity for up to 30 hours a week. Your first WorkFirst activity will probably be 12 weeks of job search.

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- ❖ Due to the pandemic, DSHS had temporarily stopped requiring WorkFirst activities if you got TANF. But starting September 1, 2021, you have to meet your WorkFirst participation requirements again.
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## Do I have options?

Yes. If you are already working 20 hours or have at least 16 hours of work-study a week, DSHS will let you get TANF and a higher education without sanction (having your benefits reduced).

This schedule may be hard. There may be more work requirements later. But you can finish your education without full support from TANF.

We also explain some other options here. It might help you figure out a good plan for yourself.

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- ❖ **WorkFirst rules for 2-parent families** are different.
  - ❖ You should discuss any educational plan with your case manager and/or call CLEAR. See contact information below.
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## Could I go to school full-time and not have to work?

Maybe. WorkFirst's options include some activities along these lines. They are called "stand-alone" activities. This generally is for 1-year information technology, health care or other professional-technical programs at state community or technical colleges, or some 4-year programs in these fields.

Community colleges have programs to get you ready for these jobs. They are more likely to lead to a good job that will let you support your family. Talk to the WorkFirst case manager at your local community college.

You must choose a course of study that gives you marketable job skills. A 1-year program in computer information might be better than a 4-year degree in psychology. You would have up to 4 years to look for a job and still get benefits. If you got a psychology degree, you would have just a year's worth of benefits left.

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- ❖ Some jobs, like work with children or vulnerable adults, require a **clean background check**. Read [CPS Investigations and Findings](#) and [APS Investigations and Findings](#).
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## Do I have to do WorkFirst?

DSHS wants to make sure you are in the best activities to meet your needs and help you move forward. You may disagree with DSHS and your case manager about the best plan for your success.

**You can choose not to take part in WorkFirst. You could keep going to school while getting just partial TANF.** If you do not have a good reason not to do WorkFirst, DSHS will sanction you (reduce your benefits) for not cooperating. A sanction means both:

- 40% less of your TANF **or** 1 person's share, whichever is more
- Less food assistance

Read [WorkFirst Sanctions](#).

## **I have a good reason for not cooperating.**

Before sanctioning you, DSHS will ask you to a **case staffing** meeting. This is your chance to explain your good reason. You have 10 days to respond to DSHS to explain your situation.

DSHS must send you a notice telling you when the case staffing is. You can bring people to help support you. **If you do not go, DSHS will make a decision without your input.**

## **DSHS is sanctioning me. Now what?**

The 60-month time limit to get TANF is still running. If you are in sanction more than 2 months in a row, DSHS will close your case.

## **Can I get the full TANF amount back after sanction?**

You can try. DSHS rules make it hard. You must follow your IRP for 4 full weeks in a row. DSHS will remove the sanction the next month.

## **How hard is it to not do WorkFirst and go to college?**

It depends. You must figure out how to have enough income to meet your basic needs and child care. You might replace what you lose from your TANF with school financial aid. Talk to a financial aid officer at your school.

You could also work enough hours to make up the TANF you lose from the sanction. You would have to work between 8 and 12 hours a week at minimum wage to make up the 40% loss of your grant. DSHS only “counts” half of your gross take-home pay. It lowers your TANF by the other half. Work-Study earnings do not count as income or affect your TANF amount.

You may also get your sanction lifted temporarily if you work during the summer.

## **Does Work-Study count towards WorkFirst?**

Yes. 16 or more hours of work-study will meet the Work First participation requirement. Your IRP should also include community college or other technical or vocational training.

## **I am at a 4-year school, or in a shorter program not approved by my case manager.**

You still must work 20 hours a week. Your IRP should list your school hours as “VU” (Vocational Unapproved).

To meet WorkFirst in a 4-year degree program, you could combine work-study with other paid work to equal 20 hours a week.

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- ❖ Work-study earnings do not count against TANF. DSHS subtracts 50% of other earned income from your TANF.
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## **Can I get childcare assistance?**

Yes. You can get Working Connections Child Care (WCCC) for any hours you work. If your schooling and your work-study hours are part of your IRP, you can get child care for those times. Read [Working Connections Child Care](#).

## **Will it hurt my medical or food assistance if I am sanctioned?**

**Medical benefits:** No.

**Food assistance:** Maybe. Food assistance has work requirements. They are different from TANF requirements. **You are exempt (excused) from food assistance work requirements if you are in college at least half-time and one of these is true:**

- You are responsible for more than ½ (one-half) the care of a child age 5 or younger.
- You are responsible for more than ½ (one-half) the care of a child age 6 through 11 when you cannot get childcare so you can go to class and work 20 hours a week or do work-study.
- You are a single parent caring for your child age 11 or younger.
- You have parental responsibility of a child who is age 11 or younger. The child’s parents and your spouse do not live with you.

## **I am in one of the situations above. DSHS reduced my food assistance anyway.**

If you think DSHS made a mistake, you can speak with a supervisor, ask for a hearing, or both. Read [Representing Yourself at an Administrative Hearing](#).

## **I still have more questions about WorkFirst.**

Read [Questions and Answers about WorkFirst](#). Or read more about TANF and WorkFirst at [WashingtonLawHelp.org](#).

## **Get Legal Help**

- **Apply online** with [CLEAR\\*Online](#) - [nwjustice.org/apply-online](#)
- **Facing a legal issue in King County** (other than Eviction or Foreclosure)? Call 2-1-1 (or toll-free 1-877-211-9274) weekdays 8:00 am - 6:00 pm. They will refer you to a legal aid provider.
- **Facing a legal issue outside of King County** (other than Eviction or Foreclosure)? Call the CLEAR Hotline at 1-888-201-1014 weekdays between 9:15 am - 12:15 pm or apply online at [nwjustice.org/apply-online](#).
- **Facing Eviction?** Call 1-855-657-8387.
- **Facing Foreclosure?** Call 1-800-606-4819.
- **Seniors (age 60 and over)** with a legal issue outside of King County can also call CLEAR\*Sr at 1-888-387-7111.
- **Deaf, hard of hearing or speech impaired callers** can call any of these numbers using the relay service of your choice.

**CLEAR and 2-1-1 will provide interpreters.**

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