

TANF and WorkFirst for College Students

Intro

If you get TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) and want to go to college, you probably have to take part in WorkFirst to keep getting TANF. DSHS could defer or exempt (excuse) you temporarily from WorkFirst. If DSHS does not, you must take part in a WorkFirst activity for up to 30 hours a week. Most people's first WorkFirst activity will be twelve weeks of intensive job search.

Do I have options?

Yes. If you are already working 20 hours or doing at least 16 hours of work-study a week, DSHS will let you get TANF and a higher education without sanction (being punished). [WAC 388-310-0400\(1\)](#).

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 two-parent families** are different.
 - ❖ You should discuss any educational plan with your case manager and/or call CLEAR.
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What are stand-alone activities?

WorkFirst's options include some "stand-alone" educational activities. "Stand-alone" means you can go to school full-time without also having to work. This generally means for High Wage High Demand (HW/HD)

occupations such as one-year information technology, health care or other professional-technical programs at state community or technical colleges, or some four-year baccalaureate programs in HW/HD fields.

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

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

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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](#) at WashingtonLawHelp.org.
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Do I have to participate in WorkFirst?

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

You can choose not to take part in WorkFirst and continue your education while getting just a partial cash grant. If you do not have a good reason ([WAC 388-310-1600\(3\)](#)), DSHS will sanction you for non-cooperation. A sanction means both:

- 40% reduction of your TANF grant starting the first month of sanction OR one person's share, whichever is more
- Less food assistance

Read [WorkFirst Sanctions](#).

What if I have a good reason for not cooperating?

Before sanctioning you, DSHS will invite you to a "noncompliance case staffing." [WAC 388-310-1600\(2\)\(a\)](#). This is your chance to explain any good reason for not following your IRP. You have ten days to respond to DSHS to explain your situation. [WAC 388-310-1600\(2\)\(b\)](#).

DSHS must send you a notice telling you the date and time of the case staffing. You can bring people with you to the appointment to help support you. **If you do not go, DSHS will make its decision without your input.**

DSHS is sanctioning me. Now what?

The 60-month time limit to get TANF still runs while you are in sanction. If you stay in sanction more than two months in a row, DSHS will close your case. [WAC 388-310-1600\(8\)\(a\)\(iii\)](#).

Can I get the full TANF amount back after sanction?

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

first of the following month. [WAC 388-310-1600\(8\)\(c\)](#).

How hard is it to not participate in WorkFirst and go to college?

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

You could also work enough hours to make up the amount you lose from the sanction. You would have to work between eight and twelve hours a week at minimum wage to make up the 40% loss of your grant. DSHS only "counts" half of your gross earned income. It reduces 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 participation?

Yes. Sixteen or more hours of work-study will meet the Work First participation requirement. [WAC 388-310-0400\(1\)\(b\)](#). Your IRP should also include community college or other technical or vocational training.

What if I am attending a four-year school or 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 comply with WorkFirst while in a four-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 your TANF. DSHS subtracts fifty percent of other earned income from your grant.
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Can I get childcare assistance?

Yes. You can get Working Connections Child Care (WCCC) for the hours you work, even if they are less than 20 hours. If the hours you go to school and your work-study hours are part of your IRP, you can get childcare for those times if needed. Read [Working Connections Child Care](#).

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

Medical benefits: No. There is no work requirement for medical.

Food assistance: Maybe. There are work requirements if you get food assistance. There are also exemptions. [WAC 388-482-0005\(3\)](#). They are different **from those for TANF. You are exempt from the food stamp work requirement if you are a student enrolled in higher education at least half-time AND one of these is true:**

- You are responsible for more than one-half the care of a child age five or younger.
- You are responsible for more than one-half the care of a child age six through eleven 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 responsible for the care of your child age eleven or younger.
- You have parental responsibility of a child who is age eleven or younger if the child's parents and your spouse do not live with you.

I am in one of the situations in the previous section. What if DSHS reduced my food assistance?

Talk with your case manager or ask for an administrative hearing. Read [Representing Yourself at an Administrative Hearing](#).

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- ❖ If you believe DSHS made a mistake, you have the right to speak with a supervisor, ask for an administrative hearing, or both.
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What if I have more questions about WorkFirst?

Read [Questions and Answers about WorkFirst](#). Call CLEAR at 1-888-201-1014 to ask for a copy. Or read more about TANF and WorkFirst at [WashingtonLawHelp.org](#).

What if I need legal help?

You might need legal help if your case is complicated, you believe you would have a hard time representing yourself, or for more info.

- If you have low income and live outside King County, call CLEAR at 1-

888-201-1014 weekdays 9:15 a.m. - 12:15 p.m.

- If you live in King County, call the King County Bar Association's Neighborhood Legal Clinics at (206) 267-7070, 9:00 a.m. - noon, Monday – Thursday, to schedule a free half-hour of legal advice.

This publication provides general information concerning your rights and responsibilities. It is not intended as a substitute for specific legal advice.

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