



Questions and Answers about WorkFirst: The Basics

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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.
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What is WorkFirst?

Almost all families who get TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) must participate (take part) in WorkFirst. You must do a job search program. You must also take a job, if offered one.

Do I have to do WorkFirst?

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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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Usually, most people have to take part in WorkFirst. There are **exceptions**. You are exempt (do not have to take part) if:

- **You have a baby under 1 year old.** (You can choose to do WorkFirst anyway.) You may be exempt for a total of 12 months in your adult lifetime. There is no limit to how many times you can use the 12-month exemption. But your 60-month lifetime limit for cash benefits runs even while you are using the exemption.
- You are **55 years or older and take care of someone's child.**
- You have a **severe and chronic disability.** (See "I have a Disability. Does that make a difference?" below.)
- You **care for a "special needs" child.** A medical professional must agree you cannot be away from home for more than 10 hours a week.

- You **care for a relative with a disability**. A medical professional must agree you cannot be away from home for more than 10 hours a week.

What is “participation in WorkFirst”?

You must:

- take part in a job search for 12 weeks
- keep participating full-time as directed if you do not find a job
- keep up your job search even if working part-time
- accept any job offered
- work with a WorkFirst case manager to come up with an **Individual Responsibility Plan (IRP)** (see “What is an Individual Responsibility Plan?” below)
- do the activities set out in the Individual Responsibility Plan
- if you are 16 or 17, be in high school or similar program
- complete a WorkFirst orientation

I have a disability. Does that make a difference?

It can. If you have a disability that makes it hard for you to work or look for work, tell your case manager right away. **You must ask your medical provider to address your ability to work.**

If you need special help to be able to take part, ask for it. Read [DSHS Help for People with Disabilities: Necessary Supplemental Accommodations](#).

Are there other good reasons I should not take part in WorkFirst?

Yes:

- You work 32 hours or more a week (35 hours or more for 2-parent households).

- You do work-study 16 hours a week and go to community or technical college at least half-time.
- You are under 18, and you are still in school full-time.
- You are under 20, and you are still in a high school program (or equivalent) full-time.
- You are pregnant, or have a baby under a year old. You must do other “Pregnancy to Employment” activities. (See below.)
- Your situation keeps you from doing a search. (**Examples:** health problems; homelessness; you are a domestic violence victim.) You will need other activities to help you out of your situation.

What if I am pregnant?

You will take part in “Pregnancy to Employment.”

- During your 3rd trimester, you must be in mental health or substance abuse treatment if your DSHS worker says you need it
- During your 3rd trimester, you do not have to take part in work activity
- You can get other services throughout the pregnancy to help you look for work while meeting your child’s needs

You can get these services:

- Parenting education
- Parenting skills training
- Mental health treatment
- Substance abuse treatment
- Domestic violence services
- Employment services

What if I do not take part in WorkFirst at all?

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Usually, DSHS will lower your TANF grant by 40%, unless it decides you have a good reason for not taking part. Read [WorkFirst Sanctions](#).

What is the job search phase?

You must do a 12-week job search at the Employment Security Department (ESD). You must take part 32 to 40 hours a week. You must report in as directed.

Do I have to take a job for less than minimum wage?

No. You can only accept a job if all these are true: the job

- pays at least minimum wage
- has industrial insurance
- has health and safety standards
- pays unemployment compensation
- gives the same benefits to the TANF worker as to other employees

A job must not be a result of a strike. A job must not interfere with your religion.

I cannot find a job.

You and your DSHS worker will look at why you did not find a job, and at experiences, activities and services that would help you. This is a **comprehensive evaluation**. The DSHS worker may assign you services and activities she believes will make you employable. DSHS must involve you in this decision. You and your worker will agree on and sign an Individual Responsibility Plan (IRP).

What is an Individual Responsibility Plan (IRP)?

It lists what you must do to get a job in the shortest time possible. It also lists **support services** to help you get a job. Read [WorkFirst Individual Responsibility Plans](#) and [DSHS Support Services for WorkFirst Participants](#).

If you do not do an activity listed in your IRP, DSHS will sanction you (reduce your benefits) just as if you had failed to take part in job search. Read [WorkFirst Sanctions](#) to learn more.

Can I get training as part of my IRP?

Yes, if your WorkFirst evaluation shows you need it to get a job, or a better job. You can only get approval for training for up to 12 months. Read [Workfirst Education and Training Opportunities](#).

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- ❖ You can get help with childcare costs through the [Working Connections Child Care \(WCCC\)](#) program.
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Can I get basic education through WorkFirst?

Maybe. Read [Workfirst Education and Training Opportunities](#).

I disagree with my DSHS worker about a WorkFirst requirement.

You can ask for an administrative hearing if you disagree with any decision DSHS makes about your WorkFirst plan, including:

- exemption
- deferral
- components to be included in your IRP
- services available
- sanctions

You ask for a hearing by writing to:

Office of Administrative Hearings (OAH)
P.O. Box 42488
Olympia, WA 98504

You should also get legal advice:



Get Legal Help

- **Apply online** with [CLEAR*Online](https://nwjustice.org/apply-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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