

Questions and Answers about WorkFirst

What is WorkFirst?

Almost all families who get TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) must participate (take part) in WorkFirst.

You must do both these:

- do a job search program
- take a job, if offered one

Do I have to take part in WorkFirst?

Probably. Most adults and teens over 16 must take part in WorkFirst.

There are some **exceptions**. You are exempt (do not have to take part) if:

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

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

What does "participation in WorkFirst" mean?

It means you must:

- take part in a job search for twelve 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 develop an Individual Responsibility Plan (see below: "What is an Individual Responsibility Plan?")
- keep appointments
- do community service, work experience or other 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

What if I have a disability?

DSHS must figure out how “employable” you are before you start any job search activities. If you have a disability that makes it hard for you to work or look for work, tell your case manager right away. Ask for a deferral from WorkFirst and time for your doctor to fill out a disability documentation form. **You must ask your medical provider to address your ability to work.** If you need special help to be able to participate, ask for it. Read [DSHS Help for People with Disabilities: Necessary Supplemental Accommodations](#).

Will DSHS accept other good reasons for me to not take part in WorkFirst?

Yes:

- You work 32 hours a week or more (35 hours or more if you are part of a two-parent household).
- You do work-study for 16 hours a week and attend community or technical college at least half-time.
- You are under 18, have not finished high school or a similar program, and you are in school full-time.
- You are under 20, have not finished high school or a similar program, and you are in a school program full-time.
- You are pregnant, or have a baby under a year old. You must take part in other “Pregnancy to Employment” activities. (See below.)
- Your personal situation is keeping you from doing a search. (**Examples:** health

problems; homelessness; you are a domestic violence victim.) You will need other activities on your IRP to help you out of your situation.

What happens if I am deferred from participating in job search?

If you do not have to do job search right away, you are deferred. You must take part in coming up with an Individual Responsibility Plan (IRP). See below: “What is an Individual Responsibility Plan?”

What if I am pregnant?

You will take part in “Pregnancy to Employment.” This is like having an IRP. There are some differences:

- During your third trimester, you must be in mental health or substance abuse treatment if your DSHS worker says you need it
- During your third 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

If you are in Pregnancy to Employment, you and your DSHS worker can agree that you get these services:

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

- Employment services

What if I do not participate in WorkFirst at all?

DSHS will sanction you, unless it decides you have a good reason for not being able to take part. “Sanction” means DSHS cuts your TANF grant by 40%. Read [WorkFirst Sanctions](#).

What is the job search phase?

You must do a twelve-week job search at the Employment Security Department (ESD). You must take part 32 to 40 hours a week. ESD workers monitor your participation. You must report in as directed. If you live in a city, you may have to sign in on a computer system every day.

Do I have to accept a job with unsafe working conditions or for less than minimum wage?

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

- has industrial insurance
- has health and safety standards
- pays at least minimum wage
- 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.

What if I do not find a job?

You and your DSHS worker will look at why you did not find a job, and at the 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 includes **support services**. These address personal or family problems that make it harder for you to get a job.

The plan also includes activities and experiences to help you get a job. Each activity should have start and end dates.

You and the DSHS worker should fill out the IRP together. You should make changes to it as needed as you move through the program or your situation changes. Read [WorkFirst Individual Responsibility Plans](#).

What support services can I get?

[WAC 388-310-0800](#) has a chart showing what you can get. (A copy is also at the end of this publication.)

A list of support services is a part of the IRP.

Will DSHS pay for my support services?

Yes, when all these are true:

- You have asked for the service
- DSHS decides the service is needed
- You could not take part in WorkFirst without the service

DSHS might forget to tell you that you can get these services. Ask for what you need.

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- ❖ You can only get up to \$3,000 in services in a year. Most services have dollar limits.
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What else will I have to do?

Any work-related activities that will help you get a job in the shortest possible time.

Examples include:

- basic education
- work experience
- on the job training
- customized job skills training (CJST)
- other subsidized employment
- paid employment
- community service
- vocational training

The IRP sets out the activities chosen by, or for, you, how long they will last, number of hours required, and any other requirements.

What does it mean when an activity or service is in my IRP?

You must do it. If you do not, DSHS will sanction you just as if you had failed to take part in job search.

Can I get training?

Yes, if your evaluation shows you need it to get a job, or a better job. Vocational training can be part of your IRP. You can only get approval for up to twelve months.

WorkFirst may pay for vocational training costs if both these are true:

- it is in your IRP
- there is no other way to pay those costs

You may have to push DSHS to put vocational training in your IRP and pay for it.

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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. If you combine any of the following with 20 hours of paid work, work experience or job search and you are 20 years old or older, you can put any of these in your IRP:

- GED program
- English as a Second Language
- adult basic education

If you are 18 or 19, you can get basic education if both these are true:

- you have not finished high school or its equivalent
- you need the education to find a job

What is Work Experience?

It is paid or unpaid work for any of these:

- a non-profit organization
- a community or technical college
- government

- maybe an internship or practicum

A Work Experience assignment may last up to six months. Then DSHS must review it.

Minimum wage laws apply to your Work Experience. DSHS cannot make you take part in an unpaid work experience for more hours than it would take to earn the amount of your TANF grant at minimum wage.

Example: a two-person family gets a grant of \$385. Divide this by minimum wage of \$12.00 (minimum wage as of 2019). The result: 32 hours a month is the maximum number of hours.

What is subsidized employment?

It is work-study or on-the-job training. In on-the-job training, the employer provides training that may include classroom time. DSHS may pay back the employer for up to 50% of your wages (before taxes).

The Community Jobs program is another work component available in some areas. The employer pays Community Jobs participants directly.

What is community service?

It is unpaid work for a non-profit or government organization, or volunteer work that benefits your community or family.

Some **examples:**

- caring for a relative with a disability
- caring for your grandchild
- volunteering at your child's childcare, preschool or elementary school
- taking part in drug or alcohol treatment

You cannot take part in community service for more hours than it would take to earn the amount of your TANF grant at minimum wage.

What if I disagree with my DSHS worker about a WorkFirst requirement?

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

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

Ask for a hearing by filling out an Administrative Hearing Request at your local DSHS office or writing to Office of Administrative Hearings, P.O. Box 42488, Olympia, WA 98504.

You should also get legal advice:

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- ❖ If you live outside King County, call CLEAR at 1-888-201-1014 weekdays 9:15 a.m. to 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. to noon, Tuesday – Thursday, to schedule a free 30 minute consultation with a lawyer.
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❖ The table below can be found at WAC 388-310-0800.

- Work-related activities include looking for work or taking part in workplace activities, such as community jobs or a work experience position.
- Safety-related activities include meeting significant or emergency family safety needs, such as dealing with family violence. When approved, safety-related support services can be more than the dollar or category limits listed below.
- Some support services are available if you need them for other required activities in your IRP.

Type of support service	Limit	• Work	•• Safety	••• Other
Reasonable accommodation for employment	\$1,000 for each request	x		
Clothing/uniforms	\$75 - \$150 per program year	x		
Diapers	\$75 per child per month	x		
Haircut/Styling	\$50 per each request	x		
Lunch	Same rate as established by OFM for state employees	x		
Personal hygiene	\$100 provided by DSHS and CTED	x		
Professional, trade, association, union, bonds, certification costs, professional licenses and fees	\$300 for each due or fee	x		
Relocation related to employment (can include rent, housing, and deposits)	\$1,500 per program year	x		
Short-term lodging and meals in connection with job interviews/tests	Same rate as established by OFM for state employees	x		
Tools/equipment	\$750 per program year	x		
Car repair needed to restore car to operable condition	\$250- \$500 per program year	x	x	

Type of support service	Limit	• Work	•• Safety	••• Other
License/fees	\$130 per program year	x	x	
Mileage, transportation, and/or public transportation	Same rate as established by OFM for state employees	x	x	
Transportation allotment (gasoline)	Up to \$50 per request	x	x	x
Counseling	No limit	x	x	x
Educational expenses	\$300 for each request if it is an approved activity in your IRP and you do not qualify for sufficient student financial aid to meet the cost	x		x
Medical exams (not covered by Medicaid)	\$150 per exam	x	x	x
Public transportation	\$150 per month	x	x	x
Testing-diagnostic	\$250 per request	x	x	x

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