

ECONOMIC SERVICES ADMINISTRATION – COMMUNITY SERVICES DIVISION

COVID- 19 RESPONSE OVERVIEW

COVID-19 continues to impact many Washingtonians, including those served by the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) through WorkFirst. These impacts come in the form of illness, missed work caused by illness and economic disruptions, lack of child care due to center closures, K-12 school and early learning closures and reduced activity opportunities due to site closures at our Employment Security Department (ESD), Commerce Department (Commerce), and State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) partners as well as the need to reduce face to face interactions in our Community Services Offices (CSOs). During this uncertain and challenging time, DSHS views the COVID-19 pandemic as an event outside of the control of WorkFirst participants. Therefore, participants have good cause based on [WAC 388-310-1600 \(3\)](#) for not participating in required activities. In response, DSHS is taking the actions listed below to support those we serve and mitigate the spread of the virus:

SUSPENDING THE WORKFIRST SANCTION PROCESS, INCLUDING HOME VISITS

As of March 16, 2020, WorkFirst staff will temporarily suspend WorkFirst Sanction Reduction or Termination penalties due to concerns surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. WorkFirst services will be offered each month, however, if a participant does not continue to engage in their activity, no adverse action will be taken as a result of non-participation. Participants have good cause for non-participation since it is due to an event outside of their control. This also suspends the need for a home visit by our staff as part of the sanction process. Clients who closed in sanction will not have to cure sanction before being eligible for the cash grant. This policy is temporary and will end when the outbreak is over.

EXEMPTING WORKFIRST PARTICIPATION FOR GOOD CAUSE

All WorkFirst participants are temporarily exempt from required participation. Clients can choose to continue participation, and to the extent possible, we will continue case management, but participation will not be required. This is based on the Governor's declaration that schools close until April 27 and in anticipation that early learning and childcare providers will follow suit. Again, this policy is in response to emergency conditions and will end when the outbreak is over.

EXPANDING DESK-SIDE AND TELEPHONE WORKFIRST ORIENTATIONS

All WorkFirst Orientations will be conducted desk-side, with the option of utilizing the telephone in order to conduct the orientation when appropriate in place of scheduled group classes. This expands a

process currently piloted in a number of CSOs. Our goal is to reduce the instance of requiring WorkFirst participants to gather in groups for WorkFirst-related events/activities or reporting to the CSO for tasks that may be completed by telephone. This is to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

SUSPENDING HOME VISITS FOR THE TEEN LIVING ASSESSMENT

In compliance with Federal law, DSHS conducts a Teen Living Assessment (TLA) which may include a home visit for all unmarried, minor parents applying for TANF cash assistance, to determine eligibility and offer support to the household. Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, the home visit will be suspended until further notice beginning March 16, 2020. WorkFirst Social Service Specialists (WFSSS) are responsible to make their best effort to determine a safe living environment and situation, for the teen and their child, by completing all required assessment screening tools in the office or over the phone.

CONTINUING PAYMENT FOR WORKFIRST WORK-STUDY AND COMMUNITY JOBS PARTICIPANTS

Community Jobs and WorkFirst work-study participants will continue to be employed and receive payment even if they are temporarily unable to participate due to emergency operations changes or closures as a result of COVID-19. This aligns with directions for the Federal/State work-study participants.

ABAWD

An injunction to the new ABAWD Waiver rules has been approved in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Clients in all counties, including King County, will be temporarily granted good cause based on current partner and employer closures.

We will continue to offer a referral to any ABAWD client who is not participating in work or work like activities. Most State Board Community and Technical College ABAWD Navigators are continuing to work virtually with clients.

SERVICE DELIVERY OPERATIONS

All our offices are still open with restrictions to services offered in lobbies. We expanded telephonic signature last week to include new applications, so clients don't have to submit a signed paper or online application before they apply by phone. We are pushing as many services and staff to phones as possible to reduce need for in-person services. However, many of our staff are also impacted by school closures, childcare challenges, etc., and so we are seeing increased wait times on the phones as well. We are deploying as many of those staff as we can onto telework to support the Contact Center, but do have some equipment and software limitations so it will take some time to ramp that up.