

Questions and Answers on the TANF Five-Year Time Limit

What is the TANF time limit?

There is a sixty-month (five-year) time limit for receiving TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) and SFA (State Family Assistance) cash assistance. But the existence of the time limit **does not** mean that your family will automatically stop receiving cash assistance at the end of sixty months. It does mean that, as you approach the sixty month limit, DSHS will determine whether you qualify for an “exception” to the time limit or an “extension” of the time limit. See WAC 388-484-0006 for a complete description of the TANF time limit.

What are the “exceptions” to the time limit?

The time limit will not apply to you if you are an adult caretaker who is not receiving TANF for yourself, only for children you are caring for. The time limit also will not apply to you if you are an unemancipated pregnant or parenting minor living in a DSHS-approved living arrangement. The time limit also will not apply to you if you are an American Indian or Native Alaskan adult, living in Indian country, and receiving TANF/SFA during a period when the unemployment rate in your community is 50% or more.

What are the possible “extensions” to the time limit?

You are eligible for a TANF/SFA extension if you can show that you should be **exempted** from WorkFirst participation requirements. This means that you cannot or should not be expected to work full-time. These exemptions from participating in

WorkFirst can apply at any time, not just after sixty months. You may qualify for an exemption if you are:

- An older needy caretaker relative (55 and older)
- Caring for an adult relative with disabilities
- Caring for a child with special needs
- An adult with severe and chronic disabilities
- Caring for a child from 0-3 months old

To qualify for an exemption, you will likely have to get verification or proof (of your age, for example, or of your own disability or the disability of a family member who needs you to care for him or her). You should ask your caseworker to refer you to a social worker if you need help in getting this proof.

DSHS will review your continuing eligibility for an exemption at least every twelve months.

If you do not qualify for one of these exemptions, you will still be eligible for an extension of the time limit if any of the following apply:

- You are participating satisfactorily in the WorkFirst Program (i.e., you have an IRP in place and are following it)
- You meet the Family Violence Option criteria (see our publication called [*WorkFirst and the Family Violence Amendment*](#))

and are participating in the activities listed in your IRP

- You have a temporary situation that prevents you from working or looking for a job (for example, health problems that prevent you from looking for a job, but that you expect will not be permanent or warrant an application for SSI)
- Your TANF grant is in sanction (see our publication called [WorkFirst Sanctions](#))

DSHS will review your continuing eligibility for one of these extensions every 6-12 months.

How will DSHS decide which category of extension I qualify for?

Your DSHS case manager or social worker should review your case and determine which extension should apply. DSHS will do this sometime after you have reached your 52nd month of receiving cash assistance (and before you have reached the 60-month time limit). Before you reach the time limit, DSHS will send you a notice telling you whether you were approved for an extension.

DSHS is supposed to ask you about any barriers, such as hidden disabilities, that may make it hard for you to work or look for work. But even if DSHS fails to ask you about physical or mental health concerns, you should be sure to raise these issues yourself if you think they are making it hard for you to participate. Ask DSHS for time to get proof of your condition and how it affects your day to day activities. If you have a medical provider, you should ask DSHS for a form to have your provider fill out to support your claim that a physical or mental health problem makes it hard for you to participate.

What if I disagree with DSHS's decision regarding whether I qualify for an exception to or an extension of the time limit?

If you disagree with DSHS's decision, you should request a Fair Hearing and continuing benefits right away. See our publication called [Representing Yourself at a Fair Hearing](#).

How long can the time limit be extended?

The time limit will be extended for as long as you continue to meet the criteria for an extension. The extension will be reviewed periodically to ensure that you still qualify.

I started receiving TANF in another State--will the time limit apply to me?

Any months that you received cash assistance paid for by federal TANF funds will count toward your sixty-month time limit, regardless of the State you received it in. But this **only** applies to cash assistance benefits received on or after August 17, 1997, even if the other state started counting TANF months toward the time limit at an earlier date.

Does the sixty-month time limit apply to months when I received only medical or food assistance?

No. The time limit only applies to TANF or SFA cash assistance. It does not apply to food assistance or Medicaid. It also does not apply to diversion cash assistance, WorkFirst support services or childcare assistance. Months when you received any of these benefits, but **no** cash assistance, do not count toward the time limit. And the time limit has no effect on your continuing receipt of these benefits.

Does the sixty-month time limit apply to months when I received cash assistance for only part of the month?

Yes. Even if you only received cash assistance for part of the month, the entire month is counted toward your sixty-month time limit.

What should I do if I do not agree that I have received sixty months of TANF?

You should request a fair hearing right away. If you request a fair hearing, do so before the benefits stop and request continuing benefits. If you lose at the hearing (the judge decides that DSHS calculated your number of months correctly), you may have to repay up to sixty days of cash assistance. See our publications [Representing Yourself at a Fair Hearing](#) and [How to Fight an Overpayment of Cash, Medical, or Food Assistance](#).

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