

# WORKFIRST

## INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY PLANS

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### Introduction

This publication is designed to help you understand how an IRP is created so that you can get the best possible plan for yourself.

### What is an Individual Responsibility Plan (IRP)?

An Individual Responsibility Plan is an agreement between you and DSHS that does two things: it says what you must do to work, look for work, or prepare for work through required participation in the WorkFirst program, and it tells what help DSHS will give you so that you can meet these goals. Your IRP establishes a plan for moving you into employment as soon as possible and should be the result of a process which begins with screening you for skills and problems, referring you to appropriate programs, and continuing to change over time to reflect changes in your participation in the WorkFirst program. It must be signed by you and your WorkFirst case manager at DSHS when it is first written and at any time that changes are made. The IRP should be written in your primary language and you should get a signed copy of your IRP and keep it with your other DSHS papers. (See our publication [Questions and Answers about WorkFirst](#) for more information.)

### What information does an IRP contain?

Your IRP must contain the following:

- Information about your WorkFirst activities. Most people will be expected to participate “full-time”, which DSHS defines as 32-40 hours per week. But the IRP will not specify the number of hours you must do each activity. Instead, it will list your activities as “full”, “1/2” or “1/4” time activities;
- Any specific requirements related to the WorkFirst activity (for example, learning English, getting counseling or other treatment);
- The services that you need to participate (such as helping you pay for child care, transportation, and other supportive services);
- Who to contact if you cannot attend one of your required activities;
- Information about what will happen if you do not do your required activities or have unexcused absences (see our publication called [WorkFirst Sanctions](#)); and
- Your agreement to get and keep a job as soon as possible.

### What kinds of activities will be in my IRP?

#### A. Job Search

You will be required to participate in Job Search as your first WorkFirst activity unless you are temporarily “deferred” (meaning that your participation in Job Search is delayed). Job Search is supposed to help you find and keep a job. It begins with an

intensive 5 day workshop that is followed by the longer Job Search process that takes between 2 and 12 weeks. It may include pre-employment training to help you learn skills you need for an entry level job that pays more than average entry-level wages. During these weeks, you will be actively looking for a job and will be required to keep a written record of all job contacts. By the end of the first four weeks, a caseworker (probably at the Department of Employment Security) will determine whether you should stay in job search. Job search will end once you find a job, you are “deferred,” the caseworker decides you need more skills or experience to find a job, or you have not found a job after 12 weeks. If after 12 weeks of job search you have not found a job, your WorkFirst case manager will do an “employability evaluation” by asking you questions to find out why you haven’t got a job yet. You and your case manager will use this information to change your IRP to include other activities that will help you become employable (see below).

You may be able to get a deferral from job search if:

- You are working 32 hours or more per week for pay;
- You are under 18 and have not completed high school or GED; under 20 and attend high school, or its equivalent, full time; or any age and attend a Washington state community or technical college at least half-time and work at least 16 hours a week in a work study program (for more information, see our publication [TANF and WorkFirst for Students](#)); or
- Your “situation” prevents you from looking for a job, for example, if you are unable to look for a job while you have physical or mental health problems, are homeless, and/or dealing with family violence.

**IMPORTANT!** Your caseworker is supposed to ask you questions to determine whether you have problems that you need help with before you can participate. If you have physical or mental problems that make participation difficult for you, your caseworker should make sure you get a “full assessment” to determine what assistance you need. Be sure to tell DSHS about any disability issues, and request a deferral from job search (if needed) and help in addressing them. If DSHS refuses to make adjustments or “accommodate” a physical or mental disability and insists you have to go to job search, it may be violating your rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Contact a legal services office right away! (Also, see our publications [DSHS Help for People with Disabilities](#), [WorkFirst for Families with Special Needs](#) and [WorkFirst and the Family Violence Amendment](#) for more information.).

## **B. Other Activities**

If DSHS decides that it is the fastest way to get you working, a training activity may be added to your IRP. Examples of such activities include:

- Basic education (such as ESL, GED, or literacy classes) which must be combined with job search, paid employment, or unpaid employment;
- Vocational education at an accredited school for up to 12 months that leads to a degree or certificate for a specific occupation, if you work at least 20 hours per week and you are unable to receive the training in any other way.

WorkFirst can pay for your tuition, books, and other education costs if this education is in your IRP and there no other way to pay for them;

- Customized job skills training (formerly pre-employment training), under rules similar to those for vocational education;
- Work experience for up to 9 months (unpaid work for a non-profit or government association);
- Temporary “Community Jobs” where the State pays for you to work at a job for up to 9 months;
- Community service, which can be either “structured” (unpaid work for a charitable non-profit or government organization) or “unstructured” (includes work benefiting your family or community, such as caring for disabled family members);
- On-the-job training (you are paid for attending job-related training and DSHS reimburses the employer for 50% of your gross wages) if you lack skills demanded in the local labor market;
- Full-time participation with DVR (Department of Vocational Rehabilitation);
- Full-time seasonal worker training;
- In-patient drug and alcohol treatment;
- Activities to relieve crisis situations (e.g., homelessness, mental health issues, domestic violence); and
- Paid employment leading to increased employability (50% of your gross wages are not counted in determining the amount of your TANF grant).

### **C. Services**

DSHS will provide additional services if there are circumstances that would make it hard or impossible for you to meet your IRP requirements. If you need help with child care or transportation (including car repairs), be sure to let your case manager know so that these services can be added to your IRP. Other supportive services that may be available to you include

- Substance abuse treatment;
- Domestic violence counseling;
- Medical care and evaluations;
- Special work accommodations for those with special needs;
- Tools, uniforms, etc; and
- Diapers for your child in day care while you work or look for work.

However, DSHS may set a limit on the amount of support services you may receive. For more information, see our publication [Questions and Answers about WorkFirst](#).

## **What kind of job must I accept?**

As a WorkFirst participant, you are required to take the first job offered to you. However, you are not required to accept any job that does not provide industrial insurance, is available due to a strike, interferes with your religion, or violates any health or safety standards. In addition, for paid employment, the job must pay minimum wage or above, and employers must provide the same benefits for its WorkFirst employees that it does for its other workers. For unpaid employment, you will not be required to participate for more hours than would equal the amount of your TANF grant divided by the minimum wage.

## **How can I get the IRP that is best for me?**

DSHS is required to involve you in creating your IRP, and you and your case manager should work together in selecting activities and services. You have the right to help develop your IRP, and you should tell your case manager any specific plans you might have. Tell your case manager about the things that you think you need to get a job, such as help with child care and transportation, and make sure your particular circumstances are taken into consideration in setting your hours of participation.

Also, be sure to tell your DSHS caseworker about any physical or mental health issues faced by you or a family member and about any domestic violence issues that make it hard for you to participate. DSHS is required to make adjustments to your IRP to accommodate these issues. If they will not, be sure to call a legal services office.

## **What if I do not agree with my IRP?**

If you do not agree with any part of your IRP and your case manager will not make the changes you propose, do not sign the IRP and instead ask to speak with a supervisor. If you cannot resolve the problem with a supervisor, you have the right to request a fair hearing. Your IRP is a flexible document. It can be reviewed at any time either you or your case manager feels necessary, and changes should be made as needed to make sure the plan continues to meet your needs in finding and keeping a job.

If you are dissatisfied with your IRP and have not been able to resolve the problem on your own, you can get legal assistance by calling Northwest Justice Project's toll-free intake, advice, and referral service at 1-888-201-1014 between 9:30 a.m. and 12:30 p.m., Monday through Friday and from 3:30 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. on Tuesdays.

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