
Early Learning & Children's Services
Committee

SSB 5286

Brief Description: Regarding exemptions from the WorkFirst program.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Human Services & Corrections (originally sponsored by Senators Regala, Hargrove and Kohl-Welles).

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Revises elements of the good cause exemption from WorkFirst participation available to parents with a child under age one year.

Hearing Date: 3/17/09

Staff: Sydney Forrester (786-7120)

Background:

WorkFirst is Washington's program of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Under WorkFirst, recipients of public assistance complete a comprehensive assessment prior to referral to job search activities. Information obtained through the assessment is used to develop an individual responsibility plan that includes an employment goal; a plan for obtaining employment as quickly as possible; and a description of services available to enable the recipient to obtain and keep employment. Unless a good cause exemption applies, TANF recipients must be engaged in work or work activities as a condition of continued eligibility.

In cases where a recipient does not engage in work or work activities and is not eligible for a good cause exemption, the family's TANF grant eventually is reduced or terminated. Termination of the entire grant is commonly called a *full family sanction*. As a matter of practice, the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), although authorized several years prior, did not begin imposing full family sanctions until after the enactment of the federal

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Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (DRA), which made significant modifications to how the Workfirst participation rate is calculated.

Under Washington law, a parent with a child under the age of one year may claim a good cause exemption from the Work First program. During the exemption period, the recipient may be required to participate in mental health, alcohol, or drug abuse treatment, domestic violence treatment services or parenting education for up to 20 hours per week, if such treatment, services, or training is indicated by the WorkFirst comprehensive assessment. The good cause exemption for a parent with a child under the age of one year is limited to a maximum of 12 months over the parent's lifetime.

In 2008 three families claiming the good cause exemption for parenting a child under age one year failed to engage in treatment indicated by their comprehensive assessments. These families ultimately lost their TANF grants, but remained eligible for Basic Food and Medical Assistance benefits.

Summary of Bill:

A parent with a child under one year who is claiming a good cause exemption from participating in WorkFirst activities can not be required to participate in any activities during the first 90 days following the birth of the child. Following the 90-day period, the DSHS must notify the parent of the availability of mental health, drug, or alcohol abuse treatment, domestic violence treatment services, or parenting education, and encourage the parent to participate in the treatment, services, or training, if indicated by the parent's pre-existing comprehensive evaluation.

Parents in need of chemical dependency treatment may be required to obtain such treatment and the DSHS must identify available treatment providers and assure that safe child care and transportation are available to the parent. No family with a child under one year may have its grant reduced due to sanction.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on March 11, 2009.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.