

# SENATE BILL REPORT

## SHB 2071

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As of March 25, 2009

**Title:** An act relating to increasing the earning potential of parents of needy families.

**Brief Description:** Concerning education for parents of needy families.

**Sponsors:** House Committee on Early Learning & Children's Services (originally sponsored by Representatives Green, Kagi, Miloscia, Pettigrew, Nelson, Haler, Priest, Goodman, Conway, Ormsby, Santos and Kenney).

**Brief History:** Passed House: 3/06/09, 96-0.

**Committee Activity:** Human Services & Corrections: 3/24/09.

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### SENATE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES & CORRECTIONS

**Staff:** Jennifer Strus (786-7316)

**Background:** The Department of Social and Health Services administers the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) federal block grant (called Workfirst in Washington). The use of TANF funds is limited to the following purposes:

- provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives;
- end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage;
- prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies; and
- encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.

WorkFirst recipients receive a comprehensive evaluation which covers a broad array of topics prior to referral to job search activities. Information obtained through the evaluation process is used to develop the recipient's individual responsibility plan (IRP). The IRP includes an employment goal, a plan for obtaining employment as quickly as possible, and a description of services to remove barriers to employment and to enable the recipient to obtain and keep employment.

Unless a good cause exemption applies, recipients of public assistance must be engaged in work or work activities as a condition of continued eligibility. WorkFirst parents must participate 30 hours per week in countable activities. The first 20 of these hours must be in a

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core activity, such as job search, subsidized or unsubsidized employment, or vocational education. Once this 20-hour core activity requirement is met, the remaining ten hours may be in a core or noncore activity. WorkFirst training and education programs are available at all 34 state community and technical college campuses as well as through community-based organizations and some private colleges.

DSHS currently provides a quarterly report on selected performance measures of the WorkFirst program. The report includes information about WorkFirst recipients at 12, 24, and 36 months after leaving the program and measures the following:

- the median percentage increase in earnings and hourly wages;
- the percentage with earnings above 100 and 200 percent of federal poverty guidelines;
- a comparison group of similar workers who did not participate in WorkFirst; and
- the percentage of WorkFirst recipients returning to the program.

**Summary of Bill:** The WorkFirst IRP requirements are revised and must include the following:

- an employment goal and a plan to maximize the recipient's success in meeting the goal;
- consideration of available WorkFirst education and training programs from which the recipient could benefit;
- the obligation of the recipient to participate by complying with the plan;
- a plan for moving the recipient into full-time WorkFirst activities as quickly as possible; and
- a description of services available to the recipient during and after WorkFirst to enable the recipient to advance in the workplace and increase wage earning potential.

The quarterly WorkFirst report, relating to wage progression, job retention, and returns to the WorkFirst program, is established in statute.

**Appropriation:** None.

**Fiscal Note:** Available.

**Committee/Commission/Task Force Created:** No.

**Effective Date:** Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

**Staff Summary of Public Testimony:** PRO: This bill arose because the prime sponsor read a number of articles about how many families return to Workfirst. One of the reasons is the IRP was neglected because it was ignoring the educational opportunities that apply to Workfirst recipients, opportunities that would allow recipients to earn higher wages and stay off Workfirst after they leave the program. Under the current Workfirst rules, a recipient must look for a job and accept that job whether it pays a living wage or not. People feel forced to take jobs that are not life sustaining and they end up cycling back onto Workfirst multiple times. This bill will not cost the state anything extra because it does not relieve the recipients from doing anything they are currently required to do. Research shows that the approach laid out in the bill is a more sustainable approach for the long term benefit of

keeping people from recycling onto Workfirst. Federal law allows for longer educational possibilities for recipients but state law makes that a rare event. Research has shown that even 12 hours of college credit boosts recipients' ability to obtain family wage jobs.

**Persons Testifying:** PRO: Representative Green, prime sponsor; Kristin Ockert, State Board for Community and Technical Colleges; Monica Peabody, Parents Organizing for Welfare and Economic Rights; Robin Zukoski, Columbia Legal Services.