

CHOWAN WORK FIRST

North Carolina's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, called **Work First**, is based on the premise that parents have a responsibility to support themselves and their children. Through Work First, parents can get short-term training and other services to help them become employed and self-sufficient, but the responsibility is theirs, and most families have two years to move off Work First Family Assistance.

Work First emphasizes three strategies:

1. **Diversio**n : Keeping families off welfare by helping them cope with unexpected emergencies or setbacks.

Under Work First, qualifying families can get a one-time payment equivalent to up to three months worth of cash Work First benefits, based on a needs assessment by the county worker, Medicaid, child care and Food and Nutrition Services, if eligible, and other supportive services.

2. **Work**: Shortening the length of time that families are on Work First Family Assistance by making work mandatory and by limiting how long a family can receive cash assistance.

To receive Work First Family Assistance benefits, parents must register with the First Stop Employment Assistance Program, sign a Mutual Responsibility Agreement (MRA) and, once they move into the work components of the program, they can continue to receive benefits for up to 24 months. In most cases, families who have reached the 24-month limit cannot receive Work First Family Assistance for three years.

3. **Retention**: Helping families to stay off public assistance by encouraging them to save and by helping to make sure they really are better off working than on welfare.

Work First increased limits on savings and vehicles, and the state legislature raised income eligibility limits for subsidized child care to ease the burden on low-income, working families. To help families stay employed, counties are also providing services, such as transportation, to families whose income is at or below 200 percent of poverty.

Ultimately, North Carolina's goal is to help all families move to self-sufficiency. Most will make it all the way; some, because of hardship or disability, will have a harder time.

North Carolina's success thus far at helping families move from cash assistance to work has led to a broadened focus for the Work First Program. No longer is the focus just on helping those families who receive cash assistance move off the rolls. While we remain committed to continuing our assistance to those families, we have added the flexibility and program structure for counties to provide former Work First families with job retention and child and family enrichment services designed to help ensure families' long-term success. Further, since child support is critical to ensuring families' success, we have expanded the Work First Program to allow counties to provide work-related services to non-custodial parents of Work First children.

Further, ensuring the safety and well-being of children is of utmost concern. Toward that end, North Carolina has taken advantage of the opportunity offered by the TANF Block Grant to enhance our efforts in this area

Effective October 1, 2009, the Work First program implemented a new process for issuing Work First cash assistance. This process is called Work First Benefits (WFB). All adults who are included in the assistance payment must have a Mutual Responsibility Plan of Action agreement that requires the individuals to work or participate in work-related activities. These adults must complete all of the requirements on their agreement each month before receiving Work First cash assistance, unless there is a good cause.

Work First Benefits mirrors the working world, where individuals "work first" and receive payment for employment afterwards. Work First Benefits was piloted in six (6) counties in which they were successful in

improving North Carolina's Work First participation rate. Work First participation rates are required by federal standards and can affect funding for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

The North Carolina Division of Social Services worked with various agencies for more than a year to assist counties in preparing for the implementation of WFB. Work First will continue to practice family centered principles to ensure that services are provided to families in need.