

**Report to the Legislature**

**WorkFirst Employee Incentive Pilot**

***As Required by RCW 43.20A.875***

December 31, 2012

Economic Services Administration  
PO Box 45440  
Olympia, WA 98504-5440  
(360) 725-4600  
Fax: (360) 725-4904



# WorkFirst Employee Incentive Pilot

[RCW 43.20A.875](#) requires that no later than January 1, 2012, the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) must establish an employee incentive program pilot for employees who work directly with participants in the WorkFirst program. The pilot must provide for eight (8) hours of paid annual leave per year, in addition to the annual leave the employee normally accrues, for those employees who assist the participants in meeting certain outcomes to be established by DSHS. The outcomes established must be of significance for the participant and can include achieving unsubsidized employment or the removal of a significant barrier to unsubsidized employment.

DSHS is required to report to the Legislature by January 1, 2013, on the implementation of the pilot project, including how many employees received paid annual leave, what outcomes were achieved, and the savings associated with the achievement of the outcomes.

## **Background:**

A workgroup was formed in October 2011 to draft policies, procedures, and pilot criteria for the WorkFirst Employee Incentive Program (EIP) pilot. Workgroup members represented staff who worked directly with WorkFirst participants, Community Services Division (CSD) local office management, CSD Headquarters policy staff, DSHS Human Resources and the Department of Personnel. In addition, the department met its obligation under Article 38 of the Washington Federation of State Employees (WFSE) Collective Bargaining Agreement, meeting with WFSE to bargain the potential impacts of this pilot. As part of that agreement, members of the bargaining team were added to the workgroup. The pilot began March 1, 2012 and ended October 31, 2012.

The Workgroup was tasked with:

- Defining *significant barrier*
- Determining what job functions qualified to participate in the pilot.
- Establishing the duration of the pilot
- Developing processes for enrolling in the pilot, submitting an application, evaluation and disposition of the application, and an appeal process.
- Creating a Communication and Marketing Plan

The EIP pilot adhered to all civil service and merit system rules, regulations, administrative policies, and collective bargaining agreements. During program development, DSHS management worked closely with the WFSE to ensure the broadest possible participant pool while adhering to statutory requirements.

### **Definition of *significant barrier***

- A significant barrier prevents a client from gaining self-sufficiency through unsubsidized employment or other means of support that reduces or eliminates the need for public assistance.
- A significant barrier is not status quo, or what is expected on a daily basis of an employee, or a client moving through WorkFirst Activities as part of the regular program.
- The activity must be based upon each individual client's case.

### **Qualifying Job Functions**

The following job functions were qualified to enroll in the pilot:

- WorkFirst Program Specialists and Supervisors
- Social Workers and Supervisors
- Financial Service Specialists and Supervisors
- Support Enforcement Officers and Supervisors.

Washington Management Service (WMS) employees were not eligible to participate in the pilot.

### **Publishing and Marketing**

In January 2012, ESA began providing general information about the upcoming EIP pilot. As the pilot rules and parameters were developed, information was shared with staff through meetings, memos and ESA's internal website. Two weeks before the start of the enrollment period, a memo from the CSD Director was sent to all staff encouraging participation and providing instructions in how to enroll in the pilot.

### **Enrolling in the Pilot**

To enroll, a qualified employee sent an email to an inbox created specifically for the pilot. The enrollment period began two weeks prior to the first day of the pilot. A total of 738 qualified employees enrolled in the pilot. Enrollment ensured the qualified employee could submit an application for the award during the pilot. If an employee did not enroll, they could not submit an application.

### **Duration of the Pilot**

The pilot began March 1, 2012 and ended October 31, 2012.

### **Submitting an Application for Award**

Qualified employees enrolled in the pilot were instructed to make application for the award at the point they performed an activity that potentially met the program requirements.

In order to qualify for consideration, all submittals were required to meet the following Core Program Pilot Parameters:

1. Applicant must be a qualified employee as described above;
2. Client served must be a WorkFirst participant or non-custodial parent (NCP) directly related to an active WorkFirst TANF assistance unit. The client must have a significant barrier to unsubsidized employment or self-sufficiency;
3. The activity performed by the employee must rise above and beyond the regular duties and expectations of the employee's position; and

4. The outcome of the activity must have occurred between March 1, 2012 and October 31, 2012.

Enrolled employees who wished to be considered for the incentive award completed a special application form created for the pilot. Using the form, the employee described the action taken that was above and beyond normal duties and resulted in the reduction or elimination of a significant barrier to employment or self-sufficiency. Applications were submitted to an email inbox created for the pilot.

### **The Evaluation Process:**

- A. An initial review of the application was completed by the Pilot Manager to ensure the applicant was a qualified employee, the client was a WorkFirst Participant, and the outcome of the activity occurred between March and October.
- B. The application was next evaluated by a team of local and regional program experts known as “Tier 1” who then made a recommendation to approve or deny the application. The recommendation was forwarded to Headquarters for final review.
- C. Once a decision was made a letter from the Director was sent to the applicant. A copy of an approval letter was sent to Payroll to add an additional 8 hours annual leave. Denied applicants were offered one opportunity to appeal.

### **The Results:**

A total of 738 qualified ESA employees enrolled in the EIP pilot. During the pilot:

- **Thirty (30) applications were received.**
- **Five (5) applications were approved.**
- **Twenty-five (25) applications were denied. Of the 25 applicants that were denied, 4 appealed the decision. A second review was completed on each appeal. The initial decision was upheld in each case.**

We are unable to identify cost savings as a result of the pilot:

- The low number of applications received is statistically insignificant.
- A total of 40 hours of annual leave was awarded. In addition, the cost in staff time to administer the pilot was not a savings to the programs.
- We are not able to predict whether the outcomes in the five awarded cases will lead to long term self-sufficiency and a reduced need for public services.

### **Employee Feedback:**

During all phases of the pilot, we received consistent feedback from employees concerned about the intent of the pilot. Employees strongly felt that they worked hard each day to assist WorkFirst participants in gaining employment or self-sufficiency. The opportunity for an additional 8 hours of annual leave played no role in determining the level of support or amount of work an employee devoted to a client. There were many other determining factors involved

in a WorkFirst participant's success including access to services and the job market – important factors over which the workers have no control.

Other feedback we received indicated the workers did not have time to participate in the pilot or were not given additional time by their supervisors. Workers attribute these factors to the low number of applications submitted for the award.

ESA currently employs a number of strategies for recognizing high achievement. These include the ability for anyone in the organization to submit a “kudo” via our ESA website. We look for opportunities to engage employees at all levels in workgroups, tactical planning and growth and development.

### **Challenges**

The statute did not define significant barrier or provide guidance in determining what activities would be considered “above and beyond.” In the absence of defining language in the statute, the workgroup primarily relied on experience as WorkFirst program specialists and social workers as well as basic guidance from the WorkFirst Handbook to define significant barrier and determine the standards for ‘above and beyond.’ Throughout the pilot, the evaluators struggled with these concepts and were conservative in evaluating the applications.

The decisions to approve or deny applications were based solely on whether the applicant demonstrated that their work was above and beyond the normal expectations for their position. Employees and evaluators both cited that it was difficult to meet the pilot program's standard as the currently high expectations relative to their positions already result in ‘going above and beyond.’ For example, the typical work of a WorkFirst Program Specialist and WorkFirst Social Worker includes providing professional case management that includes screening clients for possible barriers and developing and monitoring client Individual Responsibility Plans. The WorkFirst Program Specialist collaborates with the client to obtain employment or improve their employment status or otherwise move to self-sufficiency.

### **Recommendation**

Economic Services Administration appreciated the opportunity to pilot this concept; however, the outcomes did not demonstrate either significant increases in performance or decreased expenditures as a result of this pilot. Given these results, ESA does not recommend continuation and/or expansion of this project.

## **Stories of Success from the Pilot Award Winners:**

### ***WorkFirst Program Specialist – Ellensburg***

Our employee was leaving work one night and happened to see one of her sanctioned TANF/WorkFirst clients walking through the parking lot towards the building. She asked the client if they could talk for a couple of minutes. She asked her why she wasn't following through with WorkFirst. The client said CPS had taken her kids so why bother. The client was homeless and sleeping in her car. Our staff was able to get the client into safe housing for two nights and then accepted to inpatient treatment. She kept in close contact with the client, monitoring her progress with the chemical dependency agency as well as with CPS. Our staff says "all of her barriers have not been removed but a couple of large ones have, and the client is on her way to improving her situation."

### ***Social Worker – Kelso***

A TANF/WorkFirst participant was recovering from brain surgery and memory loss. With our employee's assistance the client completed mental health treatment for PTSD, depression, and domestic violence. Our employee assisted the client in securing housing. With our employee's continuous coaching, the client graduated with a 4.0 GPA from community college, receiving a 2-year degree. The client was offered a 4 year college scholarship. According to this social worker, "... best of all, the client is visiting her two boys regularly after not seeing them for several years." The client was on assistance with her baby. Her two boys were in foster care.

### ***WorkFirst Supervisor – Colville***

The WorkFirst Supervisor loaned the book "Bridges out of Poverty" to her TANF WorkFirst client. She worked with the client, who had been told repeatedly that she would never be able to take care of herself. Over several meetings, the supervisor worked with the client to improve self-esteem and overcome several barriers. She linked the client to a local business woman in a mentoring partnership. The client is now working towards a college degree and has chosen a field that will lead to self-sufficiency.

### ***WorkFirst Program Specialist – Spokane***

One WorkFirst participant in particular had a good work history and was very skilled. However, she was laid off and forced to enter TANF. Our WF Program Specialist worked with the client to find new employment and resolve significant child care issues impeding the client's ability to work full-time at a job that led to self-sufficiency.

### ***Social Worker – Kennewick***

This WorkFirst Social Worker led a successful collaborative effort across multidisciplinary teams including Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), Catholic Family and Child Services, and therapists. The TANF/WorkFirst client was referred to her for severe mental health barriers. He was diagnosed with PTSD and Agoraphobia. His Agoraphobia made it difficult for him to leave his home and impossible to be in crowds. Along with the client and his therapist, the Social Worker established a team approach to addressing the client's barriers. With this support, the client established eligibility with the DVR, and resolved issues around his medical coverage that were causing deep anxiety. The client successfully completed his programs and became fully employed at \$15 per hour.

## APPENDIX 1



### Application

*\*Qualified employees who are awarded this incentive will receive no more than eight (8) hours of paid annual leave per calendar per year.*

Applicant's Name:

Position Title: WorkFirst Supervisor

Division: Community Services Division

Client's name:

eJas ID #:

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Please complete all of the following sections

1. Briefly describe the outcome(s):
2. Identify the activities that were above and beyond your normal work duties that resulted in a reduction or removal of a significant barrier(s) using 250 words or less:
3. Describe any cost savings for the agency resulting from your actions:

Please attach specific documentation and dates from ACES, eJAS, ICMS, SEMS, or other supporting information. (Please copy and paste text to a word document not to exceed one page).

Submit the completed application electronically to [esawfeippilot@dshs.wa.gov](mailto:esawfeippilot@dshs.wa.gov).