

HOUSE BILL REPORT

ESHB 1144

As Passed House:

February 19, 2002

Title: An act relating to the WorkFirst program participation exemption.

Brief Description: Modifying good cause reasons for failure to participate in the WorkFirst program.

Sponsors: By House Committee on Appropriations (originally sponsored by Representatives Kessler, Tokuda, Ogden, Keiser, Cody, Santos, Edmonds, Kenney, Linville, Darneille, O'Brien, Ruderman, Rockefeller, Dickerson, McDermott, Edwards, Conway, Schual-Berke, Jackley, Lovick, McIntire and Haigh).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Children & Family Services: 2/6/02 [DP];

Appropriations: 2/9/02, 2/11/02 [DPS].

Floor Activity:

Passed House: 2/19/02, 97-0.

Brief Summary of Engrossed Substitute Bill

- Allows parents with a child under the age of one year a "good cause" exemption from the Workfirst program.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN & FAMILY SERVICES

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 5 members: Representatives Tokuda, Chair; Kagi, Vice Chair; Darneille, Dickerson and Miloscia.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 4 members: Representatives Boldt, Ranking Minority Member; Morell, Nixon and Orcutt.

Staff: Tracey Taylor (786-7196).

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do

pass. Signed by 15 members: Representatives Sommers, Chair; Doumit, 1st Vice Chair; Fromhold, 2nd Vice Chair; Cody, Dunshee, Grant, Kagi, Kenney, Kessler, Linville, McIntire, Ruderman, Schual-Berke, Talcott and Tokuda.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 10 members: Representatives Sehlin, Ranking Minority Member; Alexander, Boldt, Buck, Clements, Cox, Lisk, Mastin, Pearson and Pflug.

Staff: Heather Flodstrom (786-7391).

Background:

In 1996 the federal government enacted welfare reform. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 shifted the emphasis of the federal program to a "Work First" approach. This approach is characterized by the idea that holding down a job and earning a paycheck is the best way for families to support themselves and leave poverty and government assistance behind. In 1997 Washington enacted its version of welfare reform.

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program provides cash grants, employment skills training, child care and other services for eligible families. A family that includes an adult can receive TANF benefits for a maximum of 60 months during his or her lifetime.

Participants are required to participate in Workfirst activities, including job skills and work related activities. A participant must have "good cause" in failing to participate or he or she is subject to sanctions. "Good cause" includes a parent or other relative personally caring for a child under six years who requires formal or informal child care in order to participate in Workfirst, but the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) fails to provide such care. Until June 30, 1999, if the parent had a child under the age of one year, the parent was excused from participating for up to a total of 12 months. After June 30, 1999, the parent was excused from participating if the parent had a child under three months of age.

Summary of Engrossed Substitute Bill:

The TANF recipients with a child under the age of one year are exempted from participation in Workfirst activities for up to a total of 12 months. This exemption is available for only one time and for one child. Once the infant reaches 3 months of age, parents exercising this exemption are required to participate for up to 20 hours per week in parenting classes, preemployment or job-readiness training, or course study leading to a high school diploma or GED. He or she may also volunteer at a licensed child care facility. A parent can choose to participate fully in the WorkFirst program.

Within available resources, the DSHS must conduct an assessment of a parent using this exemption within 90 days to identify any specific service needs or barriers to employment. The assessment may include identifying the need for substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment or domestic violence services. Information obtained through the assessment shall be used in developing the parent's individual responsibility plan.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

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

Testimony For: (Children & Family Services) Allowing a good cause exemption for a parent to stay home with a child under the age of 12 months makes good fiscal and social policy. Ages birth to three years of age is a critical learning and development time for a child. Proper development is based on love, security and care and the bonding with a permanent care giver. It is the optimal situation for a parent to be available to provide the daily care for a child. At the same time, there is a scarcity of available infant child care placements, especially with a licensed provider. It is even more difficult to get any child care for a swing shift or weekend. The TANF recipients are often challenged by a lack of a family support system, an unstable job market and a difficult work schedule. These barriers coupled with the benefits to the infant's development make the good cause exemption a positive policy change.

Testimony For: (Appropriations) In the first 18 months of welfare reform this exemption was in place, and even then 40 percent of the caseload was working. The five-year time limit is still a motivator for these parents.

Testimony Against: (Children & Family Services) None.

Testimony Against: (Appropriations) None.

Testified: (Children & Family Services) Representative Kessler, prime sponsor; Agda Burchard, Washington Association of Education of Young Children; Susan Kavanaugh, Child Care Action Council; Kristen Rogers, Children's Alliance; Donna Christensen, Washington State Catholic Conference; and Phyllis Lowe, Department of Social and Health Services.

Testified: (Appropriations) Lonnie Johns Brown, Washington Association for the Education of Young Children.