

SENATE BILL REPORT

SSB 5286

As Amended by House, April 13, 2009

Title: An act relating to exemptions from the WorkFirst program.

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 History:

Committee Activity: Human Services & Corrections: 1/23/09, 2/10/09 [DPS].

Passed Senate: 3/06/09, 46-0.

Passed House: 4/13/09, 60-37 (notice to reconsider), 57-40.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES & CORRECTIONS

Majority Report: That Substitute Senate Bill No. 5286 be substituted therefor, and the substitute bill do pass.

Signed by Senators Hargrove, Chair; Regala, Vice Chair; Stevens, Ranking Minority Member; Brandland, Carrell and Kauffman.

Staff: Jennifer Strus (786-7316)

Background: WorkFirst is Washington's program of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Under WorkFirst, recipients of public assistance are assessed 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. Under Washington law, a parent with a child under the age of one year has a "good cause" reason for failure to participate in a WorkFirst program. The Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) may require any recipient with a child under one year to participate in mental health, alcohol, or drug treatment, domestic violence services or parenting education or skills training for up to 20 hours per week, if such treatment, services, or training is indicated by its comprehensive assessment.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

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.

Summary of Substitute Bill: DSHS may not require a parent to participate in WorkFirst activities during the first 90 days following the birth of a child. Following that 90 day period, DSHS must notify the parent of the availability of mental health, drug, or alcohol treatment, domestic violence services or parenting education or skills training, and encourage the parent to participate in the treatment, services, or training, if indicated by the parent's pre-existing comprehensive evaluation. DSHS may require parents in need of drug and alcohol treatment to obtain such treatment. DSHS must identify available treatment providers and assure that safe child care and transportation are available. No family with an infant 12 months or younger may have their grant reduced due to sanction.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 17, 2009.

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: Single parents with newborn children have a hard enough time getting themselves together without also having to deal with work and services requirements. Sanctions for noncompliance are aimed at the parents but the child is also hurt. Research has shown how important it is for parents to bond with their newborn children and this bill would allow that bonding to occur. The original goals stated in SB 6016 for the 2007 session still hold true with this bill. This bill merely clarifies what the Legislature intended to do when it passed SB 6016.

OTHER: Any fiscal impact as a result of this bill would be very small. Of the 8,500 parents who would qualify for this exemption, only about 30 have been sanctioned; therefore, the fiscal impact, if any, would be quite small.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Monica Peabody, POWER; Donna Christensen, Washington State Catholic Conference; Laurie Lippold, Children's Home Society.

OTHER: Leo Ribas, DSHS.

House Amendment(s): Provides for a 90-day grace period following the birth of a child during which a parent claiming a good cause exemption from participation in WorkFirst activities will not be required to participate in any alternative activities.

Prohibits DSHS from reducing the grant to a single-parent household claiming the good cause exemption due to sanction for the parent's failure to participate in alternative activities, if required.

Permits DSHS to assign or allow a responsible volunteer or family member to serve as a protective payee for parents refusing to engage in needed mental health or substance abuse treatment, and directs DSHS to continue its efforts to engage parents in appropriate services and treatment.