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**HOUSE BILL 1988**

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**State of Washington 68th Legislature 2024 Regular Session**

**By** Representatives Simmons, Couture, Ramel, Reed, and Reeves; by request of Department of Social and Health Services

AN ACT Relating to enhancing poverty reduction, equity, and access efforts by establishing the customer voice council and strengthening community partnerships; and amending RCW 74.08A.280.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

**Sec.**  RCW 74.08A.280 and 1997 c 58 s 315 are each amended to read as follows:

(1) The legislature finds that ((~~moving those eligible for assistance to self-sustaining employment is a goal of the WorkFirst program. It is the intent of WorkFirst to aid a participant's progress to self-sufficiency by allowing flexibility within the statewide program to reflect community resources, the local characteristics of the labor market, and the composition of the caseload. Program success will be enhanced through effective coordination at regional and local levels, involving employers, labor representatives, educators, community leaders, local governments, and~~)) assisting those experiencing poverty to obtain and maintain stability, self-sustaining employment, and well-being are goals of public assistance programs and a key part of poverty reduction efforts. State poverty reduction efforts intend to effectively aid families and individuals with low incomes to thrive by allowing flexibility within the statewide program to reflect community resources, the local characteristics of the labor market, and the expressed needs of those experiencing poverty. Success in reducing poverty, and the disparate impact of chronic and intergenerational poverty on particular demographic groups, will be enhanced by:

(a) A structure to seek and use the voice of those who use or have used public assistance to shape and evaluate policies and practices; and

(b) Collaboration and coordination at regional and local levels, involving employers; labor representatives; educators; community leaders; local and tribal governments; and behavioral health, housing, early learning, transportation, and other social service providers.

(2) Effective July 1, 2025, the department shall establish a statewide public assistance customer voice council and provide staffing and training to support the council. Members shall be current or former recipients of state public assistance and shall be compensated as allowed under RCW 43.03.220. The department shall consult with the following in setting policies and membership for the customer voice council:

(a) The legislative-executive WorkFirst poverty reduction oversight task force established under RCW 74.08A.505;

(b) The intergenerational poverty advisory committee created under RCW 74.08A.510; and

(c) Local community partnership groups established under subsection (4) of this section.

(3) The department, through its regional and community service offices, shall collaborate, based on community need, with employers, current and former public assistance recipients, frontline workers, educational institutions, labor, ((~~private industry councils,~~)) the workforce training and education coordinating board, ((~~community rehabilitation employment programs~~)) workforce development councils, employment and training agencies, local governments, the employment security department, organizations serving refugees and immigrants, and community action agencies to develop work programs and public assistance services that are effective and work in their communities. For planning purposes, the department shall collect and make accessible to regional offices and local community partnership groups authorized under subsection (4) of this section, successful work and public assistance program models from around the United States((~~, including the employment partnership program, apprenticeship programs, microcredit, microenterprise, self~~‑~~employment, and W~~‑~~2 Wisconsin works~~)). Work programs shall incorporate local ((~~volunteer citizens~~)) residents in their planning and implementation phases to ensure community relevance and success.

((~~(3)~~)) (4) The department shall ensure that local community partnership groups are established and provide staffing assistance to them. Communities may determine the specific structure and composition of these groups based on community needs and existing resources for these functions. Local community partnership groups shall meet at least quarterly and shall:

(a) Elevate customer voices in the development and evaluation of local public assistance practices, providing experience to support participation in the customer voice council established in subsection (2) of this section;

(b) Promote effective communication and collaboration among the department's local community service offices, people with experience living in poverty, local governments, community action agencies, and other service providers;

(c) Advise and comment on department program policies;

(d) Work to resolve local issues including client referral and service gaps;

(e) Review local data and racial, ethnic, and other disproportionality trends;

(f) Review public assistance client feedback;

(g) Propose innovative and evidence-based collaborative services; and

(h) Provide input for the plans developed under subsection (7) of this section.

(5) To reduce administrative costs and ((~~to~~)) ensure equal statewide access to services, the department may develop contracts for statewide ((~~welfare-to-work~~)) employment and training services. These statewide contracts shall support regional flexibility and ensure that resources follow local labor market opportunities and recipients' needs.

((~~(4)~~)) (6) The secretary shall establish WorkFirst service areas for purposes of planning WorkFirst programs and for distributing WorkFirst resources. Service areas shall reflect department regions.

((~~(5)~~)) (7) By July 31st of each odd-numbered year, ((~~a plan for the WorkFirst program shall be developed~~)) beginning in 2025, community partnership groups shall develop a plan for the local aspects of the WorkFirst program and other poverty reduction efforts for each region. The plan shall be prepared in consultation with local and regional sources, ((~~adapting the statewide WorkFirst program~~)) supporting public assistance service delivery to achieve maximum effect for ((~~the participants~~)) program recipients and the communities within which they reside. Local consultation shall include to the greatest extent possible input from current or former WorkFirst participants and other public assistance recipients and local and regional planning bodies for social services and workforce development. The regional and local administrator shall consult with employers of various sizes, labor representatives, training and education providers, program participants, economic development organizations, community organizations, tribes, and local governments in the preparation of the service area plan.

((~~(6)~~)) (8) The secretary has final authority in plan approval or modification. Regional program implementation may deviate from the statewide program if specified in a service area plan, as approved by the secretary.

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