

Improve Employment Outcomes for Parents Receiving RI Works Benefits

The Rhode Island Works program is the state’s “welfare program” funded by the federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) block grant that serves around 7,000 very poor families. Over two-thirds of the recipients are children. The program provides minimal cash assistance: the benefit for a family of three is \$554 per month and has not been adjusted in over 30 years. RI Works is an employment readiness and job search program for the low-skilled parents who seek cash assistance for their families. Parents are required to participate in job readiness or job search activities and are entitled to child care if they need it while they are participating in activities.

Legislation introduced this year [**Senate Bill 2687** (Senator Pichardo)/ **House Bill 8057** (Representative Abney)] would help promote better employment outcomes for parents and strengthen this important safety net program by repealing the periodic 24-month time limit and retaining the 48 month lifetime limit.

Under current law, families can receive benefits for no longer than 48 months in their lifetime. They are also restricted to receiving benefits for only 24 months in any 60 month period.

Eliminating the 24 month time limit and retaining a single lifetime limit would **improve parent participation in job-readiness activities, provide continuous early education for young children** and reduce administrative burden on staff. It also can help the **state meet the federal workforce participation rate**, since parents who are working at least 20 hours per week would continue to receive a small supplemental payment. Working parents “count” in determining whether the state meets the federal requirements.

Rhode Island is **one of only 9 states that has both a lifetime limit and periodic limit**. The state is also in the minority as to length of the life-time limit. The majority of states conform to the federal policy of a 60 month lifetime limit (see back).

Recognizing that the 24 month time limit may not be sufficient, current policy allows families to request a “hardship extension” to continue to receive benefits.

Around 800 families receive hardship benefits each month. Parents are required to have an employment plan to receive hardship benefits. But because hardship benefits must be renewed initially after six months and then every three months, parents cycle in and out of activities and child care starts and stops much more frequently than when the family is receiving “regular” benefits. This also creates unnecessary work for DHS staff who must renew the families eligibility 3 times within a 12 month period.

Summary of State Welfare Time Limits

The Urban Institute's Welfare Rules Database for 2014ⁱ shows that Rhode Island's time limits are some of the shortest in the country. The majority of states have a 60 month lifetime benefit limit. Only 14 states have less than a 60 month lifetime limit. Two states and DC have no time limit on benefits.

Lifetime Limit:

- 37 states and DC have a 60 month lifetime limit (CT specifies a 21 time limit but allows extensions up to 60 months)
- 6 states including RI have a 48 month life time limit (but California's life-time limit applies only to adults, not to children.)
- 2 states have a 36 month life time limit
- 4 have a 24 month lifetime limit (but Indiana's life-time limit applies only to adults)
- 2 states have no life time limit (including Massachusetts and NY)

Periodic time limit:

- 9 states (including RI) have a periodic time limit in addition to the lifetime limit.

New England comparison: Lifetime limits

- MA: none
- VT: 60 months
- ME: 60 months
- NH: 60 months
- RI: 48 months
- CT: 21 months (extensions up to 60 months)

ⁱ [http://anfdata.urban.org/databooks/2014%20Welfare%20Rules%20Databook%20\(FINAL\).pdf](http://anfdata.urban.org/databooks/2014%20Welfare%20Rules%20Databook%20(FINAL).pdf)