PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program is California’s version of the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. CalWORKs provides temporary cash assistance to meet basic family needs. It also provides education, employment, and training programs to assist the family’s move toward self-sufficiency. Components of CalWORKs include time limits on eligibility, work requirements, supportive services to encourage program participation, and parental responsibility.

ELIGIBILITY

Families must meet income and asset tests and children must be deprived of parental support and care due to the incapacity, death, absence of a parent, or unemployment of the principal wage earner. Also, persons fleeing to avoid prosecution, custody, or confinement after conviction of a felony are not eligible for CalWORKs.

TIME LIMITS

State law provides for a cumulative 48-month lifetime limit on cash aid for adults. Children of adults who exhaust the 48-month time limit may continue to receive cash aid, if otherwise eligible, up to age 18.

SB 1041 (Chapter 47, Statutes of 2012) also established the Welfare-to-Work 24-Month Time Clock (WTW 24-MTC). As a result, adults may receive a total of 24 months of flexible CalWORKs services and activities to address any barriers to employment. These 24 months need not be consecutive and can be used at any time during the adult’s 48 months of eligibility. Once the 24 months have been exhausted, adults must meet the federal work participation rate (WPR) requirements (See “Participation Rates”), unless they are exempted or receive an extension. (See “Work Requirements”)

WORK REQUIREMENTS

CalWORKs provides a wide array of services and supports for families to enter and remain in the workforce. CalWORKs’ “universal engagement” requirement ensures recipients are participating in appropriate WTW activities as soon as possible. Counties are required to develop WTW plans with a recipient within 90 days from the date an individual begins receiving cash aid. Unless exempt from work requirements, parents and caretaker adults are required to participate in Welfare to Work (WTW) activities as a condition of receiving aid.

WTW activities include unsubsidized and subsidized employment, work experience, on-the-job training, grant based on-the-job training, work study, self-employment, community service, adult basic education, job skills training, vocational education, job search/job readiness assistance, mental health counseling, substance abuse treatment, domestic abuse services, and other activities necessary to assist recipients in obtaining employment.

An adult in a one-parent assistance unit (AU) is required to participate in WTW activities for an average of 30 hours per week each month or 20 hours per week each month if he or she has a child under the age of 6. In a two-parent AU, one or both adults must participate in WTW activities for a combined total of an average of 35 hours per week.

However, a client who meets specific criteria may be exempt from WTW participation requirements. Among other reasons, a client may qualify for a WTW exemption if they are disabled, if they are pregnant and cannot work, if they are caring for a young child or if they are caring for an incapacitated household member. Some exempt clients choose to voluntarily participate in WTW activities. A client may also be granted good cause when it has been determined that a condition or circumstance temporarily prevents the client from participating in WTW activities.
PARTICIPATION RATES

State work participation requirements are designed to assist in meeting federal work participation rates in order for California to avoid fiscal penalties. Federal work participation rates are as follows:

50 percent of all families with work-eligible adults (both one- and two-parent) must be working or in a countable work activity for 30 hours per week.

90 percent of families with two work-eligible adults must be working or in a work activity for a combined total of 35 hours each week.

The federal government can assess penalties on the state for not achieving work participation rates. In California, counties that do not achieve the federal participation rates will share in any such fiscal penalties.

SUPPORTIVE SERVICES & SPECIAL PROGRAMS

Supportive services, including child care, transportation, ancillary expenses, and personal counseling are available for families participating in WTW activities. If needed supportive services are not available, the recipient has good cause for not participating.

There are special supportive services and intensive case management services also available for pregnant and parenting teens. These services are provided through the Cal-Learn Program, which is designed to encourage pregnant and parenting teens to return to and/or stay in school. Cal-Learn teens can get bonuses or be sanctioned four times a year depending on the teen’s grades. An additional bonus is given to each teen upon earning a high school diploma or equivalent. Participation in Cal-Learn is mandatory for pregnant or parenting teens ages 18 and under and voluntary for specified 19-year old’s.

Additionally, the Family Stabilization (FS) program is designed to increase recipient success during the flexible WTW 24-MTC period. FS supports recipients through intensive case management and barrier removal services. Recipients with a “Stabilization Plan” have no minimum hourly participation requirements, and up to six months of WTW 24-MTC stopping is available (if good cause is determined).

Also, in 2014 SB 855 created the CalWORKs Housing Support Program (HSP) to assist homeless CalWORKs recipients to secure permanent housing. HSP assists homeless CalWORKs families to obtain permanent housing and provides wrap-around supports to families to support housing retention.

PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

CalWORKs encourages parental responsibility by requiring parents to immunize their aided child(ren) under the age of six, and most must cooperate with the child support enforcement process. Failure to meet these requirements results in a reduction of the adult’s portion of the grant. If children age 16 and older do not attend school and are deemed a chronic truant, this may result in a reduction of the child’s portion of the grant unless certain conditions apply.

BENEFIT LEVELS

Grant levels are set by the state and amounts vary according to family size, exempt status, and geographic location. Families in high cost-of-living areas (Region 1) receive slightly more money than families in other areas (Region 2). A family in which all adults are disabled or otherwise exempt from work requirements is eligible for the higher exempt grant amount. A non-exempt family of three with no other income, living in Region 1 currently receives a monthly grant of $714 while the same family living in Region 2 receives $680. If that family were exempt, they would receive $799 in Region 1 and $762 in Region 2.

PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION

The CalWORKs Program is administered by county welfare departments under supervision of the CDSS. Although eligibility requirements and grant levels are uniform throughout the state, counties are given considerable latitude to design WTW programs that will work best for their diverse populations, size, and culture. Each county must have a CalWORKs county plan describing specific program outcomes and how those outcomes would be achieved in their county.

LEGAL AUTHORITY

AB (Assembly Bill) 1542 (Ducheny, Chapter 270, Statutes of 1997), Welfare to Work Act of 1997, established the CalWORKs Program in California. AB 1542 eliminated the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program and the Greater Avenues for Independence program and replaced them with the CalWORKs program.