

HOW SHOULD I TALK WITH RECIPIENTS ABOUT WELFARE TIME LIMITS?

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Answer: Among the recent changes that have transformed the nation's welfare system, the imposition of time limits on cash assistance is one of the most dramatic. Currently, 17 states have time limits that can result in cancellation of a family's welfare grant after fewer than 60 months of assistance. Another 26 states (and the District of Columbia) have a 60-month time limit. Eight states (including several of the largest) do not have time limits that can lead to cancellation of a family's welfare grant.¹

Time limits look simple on paper, but there are many complex issues involved in designing and implementing them. One key issue is how to communicate time limits to recipients. Most states want welfare recipients to react to time limits long before

reaching them — generally by taking steps toward self-sufficiency. No one wins if large numbers of people reach time limits unprepared for self-support. But if recipients are to respond appropriately, they need to understand the time-limit policy, how it applies to them, and how they can prepare. Key lessons include:

 **Give frequent reminders.**

When many months remain on the clock, some recipients will see the time limit as a distant concern; they will understandably be focused on more immediate issues.² Thus, staff need to remind recipients frequently about the time limit, how much time remains on the clock, and what will happen to their benefits when the time limit is reached. It is probably helpful to use a variety of techniques to communicate the message: letters, personal contacts, posters in the welfare office, calendars with months crossed off, etc.

 **Spread the word to partner agencies.**

In many states and localities, a wide variety of public and private agencies provide employment-related or other services to welfare recipients. Workforce development agencies are particularly important partners. While welfare staff may be quite familiar with time limits and how to discuss them, recipients may actually have more frequent contact with staff from these other agencies. Thus, training about time limits should involve all relevant partners, and each agency should tailor the time-limit message. For example, a child support enforcement agency could use the time limit to motivate custodial parents to help the agency establish a support order (so the parent will have a steady second income stream after leaving assistance).

continued on page 2



Make sure there is a clear message about how recipients should respond.

Should workers counsel recipients to get off welfare as fast as possible to “save” or “bank” their available months? Should they urge recipients to take advantage of an opportunity to build their skills, even if this means using up some additional months? Or should staff not offer specific advice but instead provide recipients with clear information about the implications of different choices open to them? Programs need to develop a clear strategy in this regard and ensure that staff are not sending mixed messages to recipients.



Pay particular attention to working recipients.

Many states have expanded earned income disregards, allowing more families to work and receive a partial welfare grant.³ Under time limits, these families face a difficult choice between (1) continuing to receive a relatively small welfare grant (with each month counting toward the time limit), or (2) opting not to receive benefits and instead “saving” the month of welfare eligibility for a time when they may more critically need it. Staff need to help recipients consider the pros and cons of staying on assistance, perhaps by helping them consider a

monthly budget that does not include the partial welfare grant.



Decide how to discuss extensions.

All states have provisions that will allow families to continue receiving benefits after the time limit under certain circumstances. But how (if at all) should staff discuss this issue when recipients are still far from reaching the time limit? In some programs, staff present the extension policy quite directly upfront. In others, staff rarely mention extensions (or keep their discussions intentionally vague) to avoid sending a message that the time limit may not be firm.⁴ Once again, programs should ensure that staff know how they should address this critical topic.



Use the time limit as a planning tool.

Staff in many programs have found the time limit to be a helpful tool in working with recipients to develop clear plans and timetables. Think about ways to use the time limit to structure a calendar for milestones and steps for achieving self-sufficiency. For example, if the time limit is two years, what are reasonable expectations for a progression during the first six months? Where should you expect someone to be after 18 months?

Language Matters

The language staff use to describe a time limit can send subtle messages that shape how recipients respond. For example, consider a recent welfare applicant who is subject to a 24-month time limit. A worker might tell this recipient, “You will reach your time limit in March 2002, so you’ve got to start thinking about how to get a good job by then.” This language strongly implies that the worker expects the recipient to receive welfare continuously until reaching the time limit, rather than trying to leave earlier to “bank” or “save” her months. It also makes the time limit seem far away and of distant concern. Finally, it might create the impression that the time limit refers to calendar months, rather than months of assistance received.

As an alternative, in one program, staff described a 24-month time limit as a book of 24 coupons, urging recipients to save as many coupons as possible by leaving welfare.

continued on page 3

NOTES

1. **State Policy Documentation Project (SPDP).** Most of the eight states that do not have “termination” time limits do have “reduction” time limits that cancel the adult’s portion of the welfare grant but retain the children’s portion. All eight of these states currently plan to use state funds to support children or entire families who reach the federal 60-month limit and exceed the 20 percent cap on exemptions.
2. **Brown, Bloom, and Butler, 1997.**
3. **See State Policy Documentation Project.**
4. **Bloom, 1999.**

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION Programs and Organizations

As of late 2000, substantial numbers have reached time limits in the following states: Connecticut, Florida, Louisiana, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, and Virginia. Contact their state TANF agency if you have questions.

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP): 820 First Street, NE, Suite 510, Washington, DC 20002; (202) 408-1080; www.cbpp.org

Center for Law and Social Policy: 1616 P Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036; (202) 328-5140; www.clasp.org

Massachusetts Law Reform Institute: 99 Chauncey Street, Suite 500, Boston, MA 02111; (617) 357-0700

State Policy Documentation Project (SPDP): SPDP is a joint project of the Center for Law and Social Policy and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities; www.spdp.org

Welfare Information Network: 1341 G Street, NW, Suite 820, Washington, DC 20005; (202) 628-5790; www.welfareinfo.org

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QUESTIONS from the Field

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