

- Can it be done within the 60 month time limit?
- Will it lead to a job that will pay you enough to take your family off ADC?

My Educational Program Can Be Completed Within My Time Limit: It will be easier to get approval for educational programs that can be completed within the months you have left in your 60 month time limit because the caseworker can see that you will have a degree or certificate before the end of your time limit. Most community college programs last 24 months or less and are generally approved by caseworkers. Most bachelor's degree programs can be completed within 48 months.

My Educational Program Lasts Longer than the Months I Have Left in My Time Limit: It may be more difficult to get approval from your caseworker for an educational program that lasts longer than the months you have left in your 60 month time limit. In order to get your caseworker to approve a program lasting longer than the months you have left in your time limit, you will need to create a plan that shows how starting a program or finishing part of a program will help you get a better job than you can get right now.

Creating a Plan: It is helpful if you can put your plan down in writing and have your caseworker put a copy of your plan in your file. Your caseworker should help you develop your plan, but you should be prepared to collect most of this information on your own. Here are things to include in your plan:

- Your long term goal.
- What skills the educational program will give you that you don't currently have.
- Information about jobs available in your area that require these skills and how much those jobs pay per hour.
- How starting or completing your educational program will allow you to get a job that will make you economically self-sufficient.
- How you can be self-sufficient within the months left in your 60 month time limit.

What Happens After We Reach an Agreement on the Contract? Once you and your caseworker reach an agreement about your plan, your caseworker will put the plan in the form of a contract and will ask you to sign it. Make sure to carefully read all the documents you are asked to sign and make sure you understand them. There are three documents you will be asked to sign a Self-Sufficiency Contract, Employment Plan, and Service Plan. You will also want to make sure your contract includes supportive services. Supportive services are the things you will need to complete the activities in your contract such as child care or transportation.

5. The Contract is Approved. Whats Next?

Once your contract is approved, you will be required to start doing the activities included in it. This means enrolling in and attending classes. Your caseworker will want a copy of your class schedule to verify you are taking classes full-time. You will also be required to have your professors sign a sheet after each class to verify your participation. This is part of a federal requirement that participation in work activities be monitored daily. You will also have to have someone sign your sheet if you are doing supervised study time or community service activities in addition to your classes. Most caseworkers ask that you turn in your

sheets signed by your professors and supervisors at the end of each week. However, you can ask to make other arrangements such as sending them every two weeks, faxing, or emailing them to your worker. At the end of the semester, your caseworker will ask for a copy of your grade report. In order to continue participating in your educational program you will have to be in good standing (be passing your classes) and be making progress toward your degree or other educational goal.

What Do I Do if My Caseworker Will Not Approve My Educational Program?

If your caseworker will not approve your educational program, you have several options:

- Mediation
- Appeal
- Change your plan
- Add a work activity
- Waive your ADC grant

When Should I Choose Mediation or Appeal?

Mediation is a meeting between you, your caseworker, and a trained mediator. Mediation is a great option when it is possible to settle a disagreement between you and your caseworker. An Appeal is a process where a hearing officer listens to both sides of the disagreement and decides who is right. An Appeal is a good option when the issue is related to a policy or you have done what is required under the rules, but your caseworker will not accept it. For more information on Mediation and Appeals see Nebraska Appleseed's Appeals and Mediation brochure.

When Should I Change My Plan?

Before you give up on a plan, it is important to think about why your caseworker would not accept your plan and if it could be changed to take care of the problem. If there is no way to modify your plan to work within the EF guidelines then you will have to change plans.

When Should I Consider Adding A Work Activity?

If there is no way to change your plan to fall within EF guidelines and no other educational plan interests you, you could consider adding another work activity to your contract. For example, if your educational program is offered in the evenings, you could do another "core" work activity during the day to meet the EF work requirement and attend classes in the evening. Keep in mind that supportive services can only be provided for activities included in your contract.

When Should I Consider Waiving My ADC Grant?

Receiving an ADC grant is a choice. You always have the option of choosing not to receive a grant but keeping your Medicaid. If you have enough financial aid to cover your expenses you may want to waive your ADC grant. Also, if you get enough child support to cover your expenses you may want to waiver your ADC grant. However, if you are going to rely on child support to cover expenses, it is important to think about how stable and reliable those payments have been and are likely to be in the future. At any point you can decide to start receiving ADC benefits again.

Over the past ten years, Nebraska Appleseed has worked to protect, defend, and further the right to choose education as an activity under Employment First. We want to help more people pursue higher education while their family receives welfare assistance. This brochure was created to help welfare recipients, community organizations, and institutions of higher education become fully aware of the higher education option, helping low-income families get on this path to true self-sufficiency.

For an in-depth step by step guide on including higher education in an Employment First Self-Sufficiency Contract, please see Nebraska Appleseed's "Choosing Education" handbook.

To view a sample plan for self-sufficiency within a 24 month time limit, see Nebraska Appleseed's "Choosing Education" handbook.

Funding for "Choosing Education" generously provided by the **EducationQuestion Foundation**, Lincoln, NE and the **Cooper Foundation**, Lincoln, NE.

- **Do not assume your caseworker understands everything about Employment First.**
- **Ask questions.**
- **Do not sign anything without knowing what you are signing.**
- **Get and keep copies of what you sign and what you are sent in the mail.**

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Understanding Your Rights in the Welfare System

Basic Questions & Answers About

CHOOSING EDUCATION in Employment First

To contact the Nebraska Appleseed Intake Line, call:

438-8853 ext. 105
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CORE VALUES
COMMON GROUND
EQUAL JUSTICE



The surest path to sustainable economic self-sufficiency is higher education. Higher education leads to more stable employment and higher earnings. The more education a person has, the higher her earning potential.

According to the Nebraska Department of Labor, the fifteen jobs in Nebraska with the highest earning potential all require at least a Bachelor's degree. The three jobs with the highest growth rate in Nebraska all require at least an Associate's degree.

Low-income parents in Nebraska doing their "work activity" planning in the welfare program are often steered away from higher education and into the first low-wage job that comes along. This typically leaves them moving from one low-wage job to another, never truly securing a future for their family. The purpose of Nebraska's welfare program is to help families become self-sufficient. Fortunately, Nebraska's lawmakers have included in state law the right of recipients of "ADC cash assistance" to pursue post-secondary education as an important part of their journey to economic self-sufficiency.

What is the Employment First Program?

The Employment First (EF) program is Nebraska's welfare to work program. It is part of Nebraska's ADC cash assistance program. The goal of the EF program is to help families reach economic self-sufficiency within a 60 month time limit. Adults in the EF program will be asked to set goals and create a plan for how they can get a job that will pay enough money so that they are no longer eligible for ADC.

What is the EF Work Requirement?

The EF program has rules that come from both the federal government and the state legislature. One of these rules is that in order to receive an ADC grant, all able-bodied adults must do a "work activity" for at least 30 hours a week. 20 hours must come from "core" work activities and 10 hours can come from "non-core" work activities. The kinds of activities that count as work activities are set by federal law and Nebraska law.

Core activities are:

- Unsubsidized Employment: This is work for pay and the pay must be at least minimum wage. It also includes Microbusiness Enterprise and Apprenticeship programs.
- Subsidized Employment: Work for pay in either the public or private sector where the employer receives a subsidy from TANF and/or other public funds to cover some or all of the costs of employing the individual.
- Work Experience: Unpaid work in a public, private, for-profit, or non-profit business or organization. This can last only for 6 months.
- On-the-Job Training (OJT): This is full time paid work in the public or private sector that trains the individual for permanent employment with the employer. OJT may include classroom training in job-related basic skills, literacy, English as a Second Language (ESL) and/or occupational skills training.
- Job Readiness/Job Search: This is help preparing to search for a job and then assistance in the job search process. Job readiness activities can include: life skills training, substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment or rehabilitation services. Job search activities include help finding a job for people who have enough education, training, and skills to get a job that will pay them enough money to take them off welfare. An individual cannot do Job Readiness/Job Search activities for more than 12 week each year and no more than 4 consecutive weeks at a time.

- Community Service: Unpaid work for public or non-profit organizations that improve the employability of the individual. This can include volunteering with a church, school, or community organization.
- Vocational Training: Educational programs that prepare individuals for jobs that require training other than a bachelor's degree or advanced degree and result in a certificate, diploma, or associate's degree. It can include both academic and occupational course work. General education and language courses can be included if they are part of the overall vocational training program. Only 12 months of vocational training in a lifetime can be counted toward a person's core work activity requirement.
- Providing Child Care Services to a Community Services Participant: This is providing child care services to another EF participant who is engaging in Community Service. Child care services may be paid or unpaid and should be helping move the individual closer to employment as a child care provider.
- Post-Secondary Education: This is a specific educational program at a college or university that leads to a bachelor's degree.

"Non-Core" activities are:

- Job Skills Training Directly Related to Employment: This is training and education required by an employer for the person to obtain employment, advance in their field, or adapt to changing demands of the workplace. This can include literacy or language instruction or other barrier removal activities when it is focused on skills needed for employment or combined with job training.
- Education Directly Related to Employment: This includes Adult Basic Education, English as a Second Language (ESL) and other courses designed to provide knowledge and skills for specific occupations or work settings. General Educational Development (GED) programs can be counted when it is required as a prerequisite for employers or an occupation.
- Satisfactory Attendance at Secondary School or in a Course of Study Leading to a Certificate of General Equivalence: This is secondary education that leads to a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) that leads to a State of Nebraska High School Diploma.

What is Economic Self-Sufficiency?

Economic self-sufficiency means having a job that pays enough money to cover the costs of a family's basic needs, including things like rent, utilities, food, child care, health care, clothing and transportation. When the EF program talks about economic self-sufficiency it means making enough money to take you off of ADC.

What is a Self-Sufficiency Contract?

The self-sufficiency contract is a deal between you and the State of Nebraska. Each contract is unique and focuses on the individual needs of your family. The contract will contain a list of things you will do to move toward self-sufficiency and a list of things your caseworker will do to help you. You must sign a self-sufficiency contract before you can get your first cash assistance check.

Do I Have a Right to do Education as My Work Activity?

Under Nebraska law, you have a right to participate in any educational program that fits within the definitions of "core" and "non-core" activities and will lead to economic self-sufficiency within the months you have left in your 60 month time limit on ADC. The only type of educational program that is excluded is post-graduate coursework (masters degree and above).

I Have Already Signed a Self-Sufficiency Contract, Can I Change it to Include Education?

Yes. You can change your contract at any time. To change your contract you will need to set up a meeting with your caseworker to discuss why your current plan is not working and how education would better help you achieve self-sufficiency.

Will HHS Pay for My Education?

The EF program will not pay for tuition unless there are special circumstances. It is your responsibility to get financial aid to pay the costs of your education. Financial aid includes things like loans, grants, and scholarships.

How Can I Get Financial Aid?

Most schools have a financial aid office that can help you figure out what kind of help is available. Any financial aid you receive will not be counted as income under the ADC program. You can also get help from the EducationQuest Foundation www.educationquest.org or 1-800-303-3745, and from the Nontraditional/Equity Program of the Department of Education at (402) 471-4823.

Are There Limits on What Kind of Educational Program I Can Choose?

The EF program has recently adopted a new rule that only allows you to do an associate's degree program for 12 months as a "core" work activity. To meet your work requirement, you must participate in a "core" activity for at least 20 hours a week. The new rule means that you can only count your associate's degree program classes toward your 20 hours of "core" work for up to 12 months. After 12 months, you can still count associate's degree classes, but only as a "non-core" activity. This means that you will have to find another work activity to fill your 20 hours of "core" work and then you can use your associate's degree classes to count toward your remaining 10 hours of your 30 hour work requirement. This new rule only applies to vocational education programs/associate's degree programs. Bachelor's degree programs are allowed as a "core" work activity for up to 60 months. The only other limit on education

is post-graduate work (masters degree and above). No matter what your degree or program, you must be able to show you will be self-sufficient by the end of your 60 month ADC time limit.

Five Steps to Getting Post-Secondary Education in a Self-Sufficiency Contract

1. Applying for Benefits

The best time to start thinking about including education in your contract is before you apply for ADC. You will not be able to get your cash checks until you have decided on your work activity and signed a self-sufficiency contract. You will be in a better position to make the most out of your time on ADC if you start thinking about your plan before you apply. To apply for ADC you need to fill out an application with your local Department of Health and Human Services office.

2. Selecting an Educational Program

There are a wide range of educational programs available to EF participants. When you are considering what kind of program to choose, here are some questions to ask yourself:

- What are my career goals?
- Am I capable of doing that job?
- Will that job pay me enough to take me off public assistance?
- Are there jobs available in that field right now?
- What kind of education or training would I need to do that job?
- How long will it take me to get the education or training that I need?
- What places offer the education or training I need and are they in my area?
- Do I have any certifications or existing college credits I can use to reach my goals?
- Can I get financial aid to cover the costs of the education or training program?
- What kind of help will I need to participate in the educational program?

3. The Comprehensive Assets Assessment

After you have been found eligible for ADC benefits, your caseworker will have you complete what's called a Comprehensive Assets Assessment. The assessment is an interview process where the caseworker helps you answer questions about your skills, abilities, resources, and past and present situations. The goal of the assessment is to find out what you are doing well and where you are running into problems. The results of the assessment are used to develop a self-sufficiency contract. Part of the assessment asks you to set long-term and short-term goals. This will be the first opportunity to let your caseworker know that you would like to include an educational program in your contract. It is important to bring education up at this point with your caseworker so that you can work on getting education in your contract right away.

4. The Contract Negotiation Period

The contract negotiation period is when you and your caseworker sit down and decide what will be in your contract to help you reach self-sufficiency. During this process, your caseworker will be focused on the following things:

- What do you want to do?