

What if I do not agree with the reason that my caseworker has sanctioned me?

Immediately get an appeal form from your caseworker or the receptionist at your local DHHS office. Fill out the form and return it to your caseworker or the receptionist. Appeal within 10 days of getting the notice and your family will continue to receive their benefits until an appeal hearing is held. If you don't appeal within 10 days, the state will stop your benefits even if you appeal.

For more information, please refer to Nebraska Appleseed's Appeals and Mediation brochure.

What if I think my caseworker does not perform the State's responsibilities as listed in the contract?

Take these steps:

- Ask for a meeting with the supervisor.
- If you disagree, you can ask to have mediation
- If you still disagree, fill out an appeal form and an informal hearing before an administrative judge will be scheduled.
- You can get help from the Welfare Due Process Project or your local legal services office.

Can I choose any job training or educational program as part of my contract?

- Under Nebraska law, if it fits your Employment First goals, you can plan in your contract to participate in just about any type of educational or job training program. This includes everything from basic job skill training to four-year degrees.
- The program should lead to a living wage job.
- You must be able to handle the program.

What if my caseworker tells me I can't do an educational program because it lasts longer than 60 months?

- This is not true. You can participate in an educational program even if its completion date is 60 months or more ahead.
- Remember, the goal of the program is to help you gain a living wage job in the future. Sometimes that takes more time.

If I choose an educational or job training program that lasts longer than 60 months, will the state still help me after the 60 months are up?

- The state will continue to provide child care and medical assistance after the 60 months, but you won't continue to get cash assistance or other services.
- You will need to plan for how you will support your family after the 60 months are over. This may include additional part-time work or more student grants or loans.

My caseworker says I can't have child care when I need it; what do I do?

The state must pay for all the child care you need. If you need it while you are going between school and work, when you are studying, or at odd hours of the day, the state must pay for it. To be safe, get this listed in your service plan.

Does participating in the Employment First program mean I have to take the first job available to me now?

- No. The goal of the program is to help you gain, over time, a living wage job. The goal is not to force you to take any available job. If it makes sense to improve your job skills or education, you can't be required to look for work as part of your contract.
- Most Nebraskans who need welfare help already know how to get a job. Most already have "marketable job skills." So this can't be used to keep you from improving your job skills and education.
- People usually get living wage jobs after they improve their job skills and education.
- For some people it makes sense to work part-time and go to school. And for other people it makes sense to look for work, and take a job that may lead to economic self-sufficiency. Think about what makes sense for you and your family.

How long can I get Employment First program help?

Your family is eligible for 60 months of assistance in your lifetime. This "time limit" begins the month after you sign the contract.

What if I am unable to work because of a disability?

The state is required to accommodate your disability and to assist you to reach your highest level of self-sufficiency possible. Depending on the length and severity of your disability, you may be either:

- completely exempt from the Employment First program. In this case you will be asked to sign a Non-Time Limited agreement and will not be considered a participant in Employment First; OR
- temporarily exempt from work related activities included in your contract. In this case you will still be considered an Employment First participant but you will not be under the 60-month time limit while you are exempt from the work requirement.

What if I am unable to work because of the disability of a person in my care?

If someone in your care has a disability that requires your continuous care, you will be asked to sign a Non-Time Limited Agreement and will not be considered an Employment First

participant. You will not be under a time limit and will not have to sign a Self-Sufficiency Contract as long as your care is necessary.

So families in Employment First are not always under the 60 month time limit?

In some cases the time limit may be temporarily suspended.

What if I get a notice from my caseworker that says I've reached the 60 month time limit, but I still need help meeting my family's basic needs?

- Your caseworker and her or his supervisors should review your case.
- You can claim a "hardship" exemption, and have your caseworker continue your eligibility.
- If you are having trouble getting and keeping a job, you will probably be able to have your cash assistance continue.
- There are other ways to make sure you and your children are not put at risk.
- You may need help at this point, so you should call the Welfare Due Process Project or your local legal services office.

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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Printed April 2008.

*Understanding
Your Rights
in the
Welfare System*

*Basic Questions
& Answers About*

**EMPLOYMENT
FIRST**

To contact the
Nebraska Appleseed
Intake Line, call:

438-8853
(in Lincoln)

or 1-800-845-3746
(outside Lincoln)

CORE VALUES
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What is Employment First?

- It is Nebraska’s cash welfare program. The money you receive is a TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) grant. Most TANF recipients are or will be Employment First participants.
- The goal of the program is to temporarily help meet your family’s basic needs and to help you reach [economic self-sufficiency](#).
- The Employment First program is designed to help you do this through individualized planning and intensive support.
- Employment First services are based on an assessment process; each client is to have a [comprehensive assets assessment](#).
- Most Employment First clients are required to be on a 60-month time limit for cash assistance.

What is economic self-sufficiency?

- Sometimes economic self-sufficiency is called making a “living wage.”
- This means having a job that pays enough to meet the basic needs of your family without needing any public assistance.
- When the EF program talks about self-sufficiency, it means making enough money to take you off of ADC.
- But remember: Just because you get a job and you're not eligible for cash assistance doesn't mean you're economically self-sufficient. Getting off cash assistance just takes a very low amount of income.

What does economic self-sufficiency mean for me and my family?

It means you won’t need help paying your rent, buying food, getting child care, having health care, buying clothing for your family, and having reliable transportation.

How much money do I need to make?

This table shows how much a single-parent family with 1-3 children needs to make in order to be economically self-sufficient in Lancaster County.

# Children	\$/Hour	\$/Year
1	\$12.05	\$25,451
2	\$16.23	\$34,281
3	\$21.96	\$46,376

“Economic Self-Sufficiency: The Minimum Cost of Family Support in Nebraska, 2007,” Nebraska Applesseed Center for Law in the Public Interest.

How will I get a living wage job?

Most of the time, that means getting better job skills through more education or job training.

How do I know if I am an Employment First program participant?

If you get cash assistance from the State, you probably will be required to participate in the “Employment First” program. If you do not get cash, but only receive food stamps, child care, or Medicaid, you will not be part of “Employment First.”

If I’m an Employment First participant, what do I need to do?

- You will need to do a [comprehensive assets assessment](#) with your caseworker.
- You will be asked to sign a [self-sufficiency contract](#).

What exactly is an Employment First comprehensive assets assessment?

- An in-depth, ongoing interviewing process.
- A process for you and your caseworker to figure out what strengths and barriers you have that will help or stop you from reaching economic self-sufficiency.
- A process through which you and your caseworker figure out if you qualify for [time-limited](#) or [non-time-limited](#) cash assistance.
- A process that must be completed before your 60-month time limit “clock” starts ticking.
- An acceptable assessment has *not* taken place if your caseworker hands or mails you a packet of papers to fill out by yourself.

What exactly is an Employment First self-sufficiency contract?

- It is a serious legal document. It is the “deal” between the State and you, the Employment First participant.
- It outlines what you have to do and what your caseworker must do to help you while your family receives cash assistance.
- The goal is for you to do things that will help you reach economic self-sufficiency, while the state gives you all the help you need to do it.
- The contract is only valid if you fully agree with everything in it.

What should I think about putting in the contract for me to do?

Take these steps:

[With your caseworker](#) and [based on the joint assessment](#), you need to ask yourself the following questions:

- How can I best use this intensive help to move towards economic self-sufficiency?
- What are my present skills?
- What are my goals?
- What kind of jobs can I get now?
- What kind of jobs pay a “living wage”?
- Are these jobs in my area?
- What has kept me from getting these jobs in the past?

- What job training and education do I need before I can get one of those jobs?
- What training and educational programs are in my area?
- How much child care do I need?
- Does my family have special medical needs?
- Does my family have substance abuse, domestic violence, or mental health problems?
- Do I need help with transportation?

[With your caseworker](#) set short and long term goals. *You and your caseworker make an “employment plan” and a “service plan.”* These plans are part of your Employment First self-sufficiency contract.

Do I have to sign just any contract my caseworker gives me?

- No. You don’t have to sign any contract until you agree with the goals, the plan, and the services in the contract.
- A caseworker can’t make you sign a contract you don’t agree with.
- You will have to sign other forms, but you don’t have to sign a self-sufficiency contract until you agree with it and feel that you are able to carry out its terms.

When do I sign my Employment First self-sufficiency contract?

- Only after you and your caseworker have completed the assessment process.
- There is not a set time frame in which the contract *must* be signed. Clients are made to believe that the contract must be signed within 90 days of the date they apply for benefits. This is incorrect.
- If you have severe barriers to self-sufficiency, such as homelessness, serious illness, or domestic violence, you may be required to have a contract and “service plan,” but you do *not* have to be on the time-limit.
- You may qualify for an exemption from the time limit, the contract, or both based on your family’s circumstances.

When does the 60-month clock start ticking?

- The time limit should not start until you have had severe barriers to self-sufficiency, such as homelessness, serious illness, or domestic violence, addressed and reduced.
- Unless you qualify for an exemption, the time limit starts at the **later** of the following times:
The month following the month you sign your contract.
OR when your youngest child who is eligible for benefits turns 12 weeks old.
- ***If you do not have a contract, your clock should not be ticking.***

Can I change the contract after I sign it?

- Yes. If your family’s situation changes.
- Yes. If you have a new plan that makes sense for a new situation.

What should be in the contract about the state’s responsibilities?

Think very hard about what your family needs while you are working on your goal of economic self-sufficiency.

Your case worker must list out, in detail, all these services in your “service plan.” For example, if you need child care for evening classes or work shifts, that should be listed. [These services include:](#)

- Anything that will help while you are working towards economic self-sufficiency.
- Child care while you are working or going to school.
- Medical care.
- Transportation.
- Finding other sources of help.
- Other services, such as referrals to substance abuse programs or domestic violence programs.

What if my caseworker and I disagree about the contract?

Take these steps:

- Ask the caseworker to explain in writing what she or he disagrees with.
- Then you can ask for a meeting with the supervisor.
- If you still disagree, you can ask to have mediation.
- If you still disagree, fill out an appeal form. An informal hearing before an administrative judge will be scheduled.
- You can get help from the Welfare Due Process Project or your local legal services office.

For more information, please refer to Nebraska Applesseed’s [Appeals & Mediation brochure](#).

What if my caseworker doesn’t think I’m meeting my responsibilities as listed in the contract?

Your caseworker must discuss the problem with you to see if you have good cause for not participating. The caseworker also must work with you to resolve any barriers to work. If you and the caseworker cannot work out a solution, the caseworker will send you a notice of sanction.

What is a sanction?

After this, if the caseworker still thinks you are breaking your contract, she or he will send you a written notice explaining what she or he believes you did not do. This notice will say you will be sanctioned. This is very serious:

- You and your family will lose all cash assistance.
- Your family’s food stamps will be reduced.
- The adults in your family will lose Medicaid benefits.

For more information, please refer to Nebraska Applesseed’s [Sanctions brochure](#).