

COVID-19 Response

Washington State Department of Social and Health Services
Economic Services Administration
Community Services Division

The COVID-19 health crisis continues to bare down on communities around the globe and here in Washington. In early 2020, restrictions were put in place to protect the health and safety of individuals and communities across the state. The Department of Social and Health Services' Economic Services Administration's Community Services Division shifted its business strategies and redesigned services to support Washingtonians as they turned to public assistance programs to help weather the storm.

The rapid implementation of a number of operational, program and policy changes ensured individuals and families maintained access to vital supports and helped protect the health of our clients, staff, contractors, partners and communities by minimizing the spread of COVID. Many of these changes remain in place and have evolved as CSD strives to meet the needs of Washington communities in a demanding and ever-changing environment.

Operational Changes

In March 2020, at the direction of the Governor's Office, CSD deployed over 2,000 staff to telework and closed local offices to the public, providing limited in-person services by appointment only. Nearly all business is conducted remotely as clients are able to access most services they need online and by phone.

Approximately 60 procedures were created or modified to support a virtual service delivery model. CSD leveraged technology enhancements such as telephonic signatures to complete applications and a secure email portal for clients to provide required documents, reducing processing time and mailing costs. Additionally, the aging "Answer Phone" system was replaced with an Interactive Voice Response system called "Customer Connect." This system allows clients to access automated case information and enhances CSD's ability to conduct client outreach which creates operational efficiencies, improves customer service and reduces call traffic.

Program and Policy Changes

Pandemic Related Assistance

- In April 2020, CSD activated the **Disaster Cash Assistance Program**, also known as DCAP. DCAP is available to Washington households who meet income and resource limits and are not eligible for other cash programs. DCAP was active from April 2020 through early January 2021 and again April – June 2021. In 2021 the state Legislature, in partnership with DSHS, amended the program to better respond to long-term emergencies, including allowing benefits to be issued more than once in a 12-month period. During April-June 2021, households could apply for the benefit monthly. In total, DCAP supported 85,526 clients with an average grant of \$323.

- **The Pandemic-EBT** program provides food benefits to children who normally access free or reduced-price school meals through the National School Lunch or School Breakfast Program, but are unable to access nutritious foods due to school closures or limited on-site meal service. P-EBT initially rolled out during the 2019-2020 school year in response to closures that occurred March through June 2020. Due to limited resources and time constraints, the program relied on a manual application process, which created additional barriers to eligible families. In school year 2020-2021, the program was enhanced to auto-enroll students based on school-reported data. P-EBT eligibility also expanded to families receiving Basic Food with children under age 6 who resided in counties with limited on-site school meal services. P-EBT benefits were extended to all eligible children into the summer months of July and August 2021 as all schools were deemed closed.

Food Assistance

- Beginning March 2020, and through the end of the public health emergency, households are eligible for the maximum benefit allotment for their household size regardless of income. Basic Food households with a monthly allotment over \$0 received a 15% benefit increase January 2021 through September 2021. These combined temporary program changes have resulted in Basic Food households receiving an average increase of \$248 per month.
- CSD applied for and received federal approval for a statewide Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents work requirement waiver. The waiver ensures all ABAWDs maintain access to food and is effective June 1, 2021 through May 31, 2022.

More information:

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Transforming lives

Rev. 10/21

- CSD extended food and cash eligibility reviews (for 6 months) and waived mid-certification reviews due in the months of April-June 2020, ensuring individuals and families maintained access to foundational supports. After the passage of the Continuing Appropriations Act, CSD extended eligibility reviews due in November 2020- February 2021 and eliminated mid-certification reviews due November 2020- June 2021.

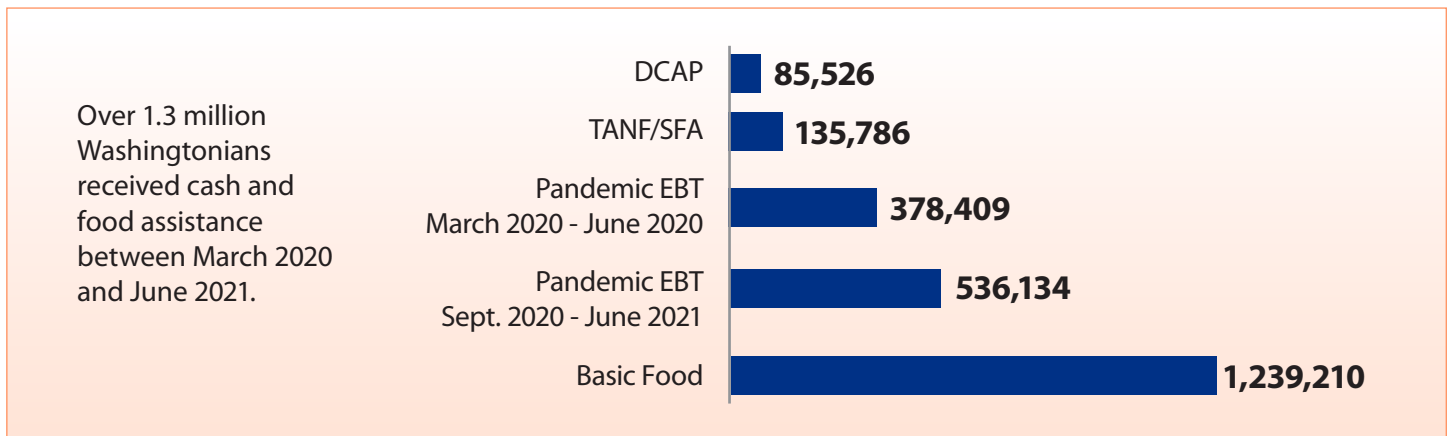
Cash Assistance

- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families WorkFirst participants received good cause exemptions from mandatory participation requirements from March 2020 through August 2021. With the recovering economy, resumption of in-person school and reduction in COVID-19 related shutdowns, CSD resumed normal participation requirements as of September 1, 2021. CSD staff are working with approximately 18,000 adults who receive TANF to discuss their current needs, strengths and goals, and develop a WorkFirst plan that makes sense for their family. Reengagement efforts are expected to be complete by November 30, 2021.
- In April 2020, CSD suspended TANF 60-month time limit extensions for families who exhausted 60 months on TANF cash assistance. Through partnership with the state Legislature, this suspension remains in effect and is funded through June 30, 2022.
- In March 2020, CSD suspended WorkFirst sanction reduction and termination penalties to families for not meeting mandatory participation requirements. Home visits associated with sanctions and Teen Living Assessments were also eliminated to protect the health and safety of clients and staff.

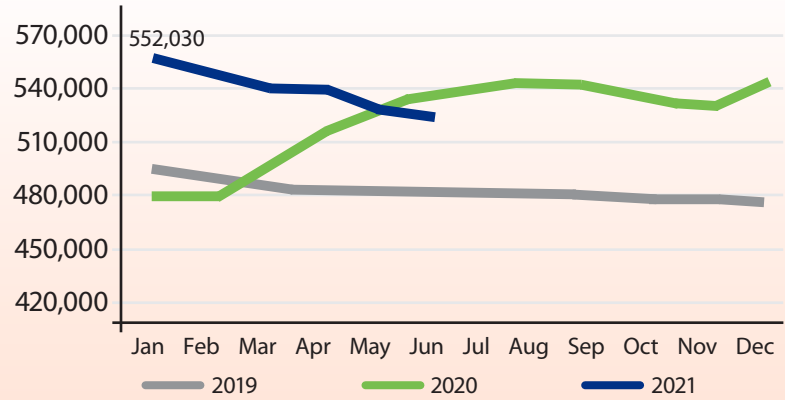
- In March 2020, CSD suspended certain Aged, Blind or Disabled program requirements such as verifying participation in medical treatment for a client’s disabling condition(s). CSD also adopted emergency rules to postpone disability and incapacity reviews, and broadened medical evidence rules, in an effort to simplify the disability determination process for clients and reduce traffic in our community medical clinics.
- In May 2021, CSD amended case planning activities to improve engagement with ABD and Housing and Essential Needs Referral clients and better support their goals. Case planning and treatment referrals resumed for over 3,900 new ABD and HEN Referral recipients who entered the caseload after May 12, 2021. Reengagement of the remaining ABD and HEN Referral caseload begins in fall 2021. Good cause for meeting certain eligibility requirements remains in effect throughout the pandemic. Supplemental Security Income Facilitation continues to be offered remotely (by mail and phone options) to all ABD recipients and applicable TANF families.

Medical Assistance

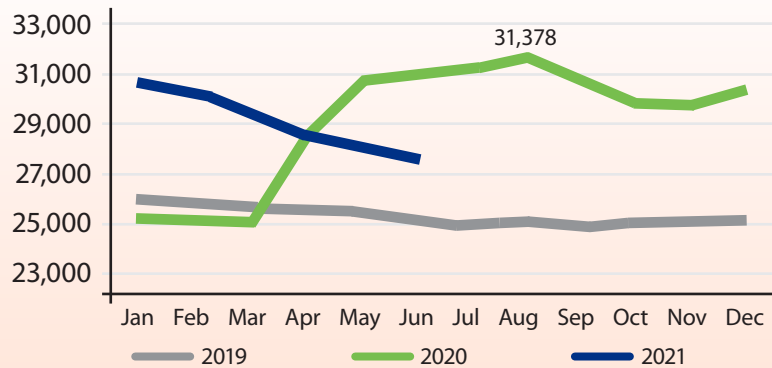
- Temporary Medicaid eligibility rules were implemented in March 2020 including 30-day extensions to provide verification of circumstances, and accepting self-attestation of income, resources and medical expenses needed to meet spenddown amounts. Certification periods for Medicaid continue to be extended in three-month increments through the end of the public health emergency. Medicaid coverage has remained active for recipients, unless an individual requests their benefits be terminated, is no longer a Washington state resident or they are deceased; coverage terminated for any other reason is manually reinstated.



Basic Food cases rose rapidly at the beginning of the pandemic, reaching 541,171 in August 2020. After declining through the fall, caseloads began to rise again in the winter and peaked at 552,030 in January 2021. After that peak, they declined through the next five months (Feb-Jun) of 2021.



TANF/SFA cases skyrocketed through the summer of 2020, peaking at 31,378 in August 2020. Cases decreased through the fall, then began to increase again during the winter. The number of cases has steadily declined throughout 2021, although June 2021 cases were still nearly 10% higher than June 2019 cases.



Compared to the 16 months prior to the pandemic (Nov. 2018 – Feb. 2020), there was a 13% increase in TANF applications and a 32% increase in Basic Food applications (which includes P-EBT applications) between March 2020 and June 2021. While there were fewer than 1,500 applications for DCAP and the Consolidated Emergency Assistance Program in the 16 months prior to the pandemic, there were 156,939 between March 2020 and June 2021.

