

COVID-19 Response

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

In early 2020, in response to the COVID-19 health crisis, changes 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 who accessed public assistance programs throughout the pandemic.

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 have evolved as CSD continuously strives to meet the needs of Washington communities in a demanding, 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 was conducted remotely as clients are able to access most services they need online and by phone.

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.

On **February 28, 2022, CSD returned its offices to full operations as public health conditions allowed**, but the pandemic response led to permanent improvements in virtual service delivery that are improving client outcomes statewide.

Program and Policy Changes

Pandemic Related Assistance

- **Disaster Cash Assistance Program** - In April 2020, CSD activated the Disaster Cash Assistance Program, also known as DCAP. DCAP is available to Washington households that 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.

- **Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT)** - Refer to the [ESA CSD P-EBT One-Pager](#) for program details.
- **Pandemic Emergency Assistance Fund** - As part of The American Rescue Plan Act enacted in March 2021, a \$1 billion federal Pandemic Emergency Assistance Fund, also known as PEAFF, was established to provide additional assistance to low-income families with eligible children during the COVID-19 crisis. Washington state received \$22.7 million from this fund. States and tribes were required to spend PEAFF allocations by September 30, 2022 on non-recurring, short-term benefits that met TANF purposes and did not supplant existing spending.

The legislature provided state funding for otherwise eligible families that did not qualify for federal programs based on citizenship status. In consultation with stakeholders, ESA chose to distribute the benefit widely among low-income families and to issue it as unrestricted cash to allow families to make decisions for themselves about how best to use the additional funds.

Washington's PEAFF benefit was a one-time cash payment of \$127 per child for families with minor children receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, State Family Assistance, Basic Food, State Food Assistance Program, or Transitional Food Assistance with income at or under 75% of the Federal Poverty Level. PEAFF was issued in May 2022 to families eligible in that month. A total of \$23,675,340 was provided to 94,300 households, helping 186,420 children and their families.

More information:

Alexis Marx, Chief, Office of Programs and Policy
Phone: 360.819.0675
Email: Alexis.Marx@dshs.wa.gov



Transforming lives

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Food Assistance

- In March 2020, eligible households began receiving emergency allotments increasing their benefit to the maximum monthly benefit amount for their household size regardless of income. Basic Food households with a monthly benefit over \$0 received a 15% increase January 2021 through September 2021. In October 2021, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) permanently revised the Thrifty Food Plan increasing food benefit allotments roughly 25% for every household. Emergency allotments combined with the permanent increase in food benefits have resulted in Basic Food households receiving an average increase of \$240 per month. Compared with February of 2020, Washington is currently providing 2.3 times the amount of food benefits, with households averaging \$443 per month.
- CSD applied for and received federal approval for a statewide Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD) work requirement waiver. The waiver ensures all ABAWDs maintain access to food and is effective June 1, 2021 through January 31, 2023.
- Following the Passage of the Consolidated Appropriations Act in December 2021, CSD expanded Basic Food student eligibility for students of higher education who were eligible for work study or had an expected family contribution of \$0 on their federal financial aid. This change will end with the conclusion of the federal public health emergency declaration.
- CSD extended food and cash eligibility reviews (for six 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 and food MCRs were again waived from January 2022-June 2022.

Cash Assistance

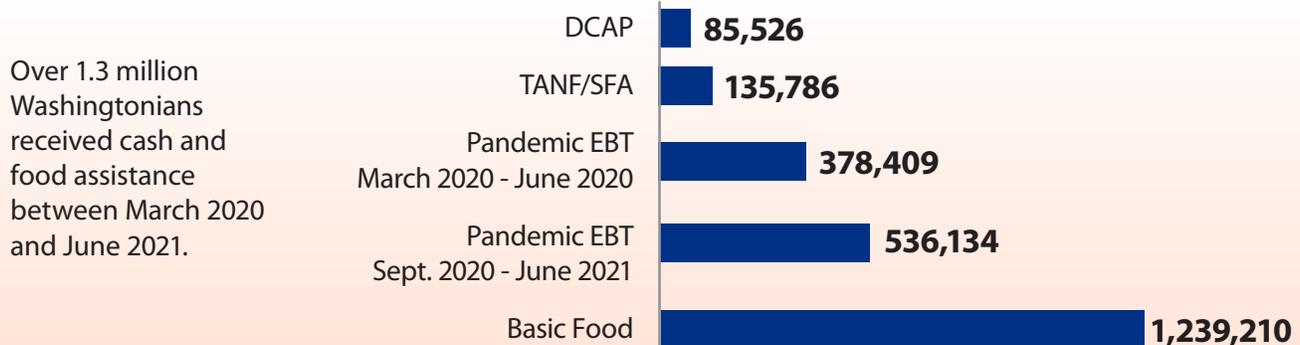
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families WorkFirst participants received good cause exemptions from mandatory participation requirements from March 2020 through August 2021. Accordingly, sanction penalties for non-participation were also suspended. With the recovering economy, resumption of in-person schooling and reduction in COVID-19 related shutdowns, CSD resumed normal participation requirements as of September 1, 2021. CSD staff worked to contact approximately 18,000 TANF recipients to discuss

their needs, strengths and goals, and develop a WorkFirst plan that makes sense for their family.

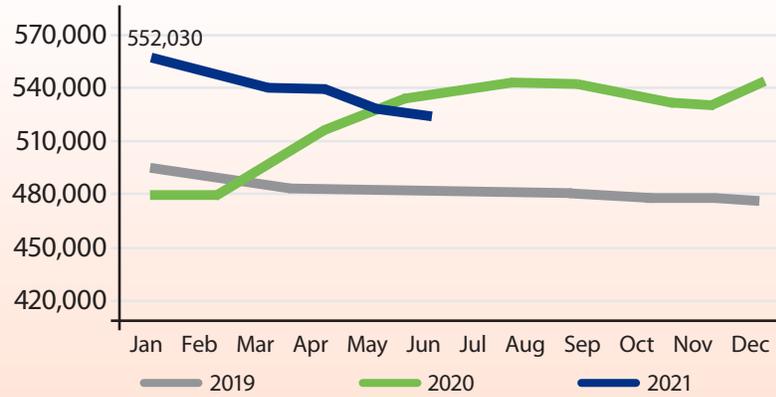
- In April 2020, CSD suspended the TANF 60-month time limit for families who exhausted 60 months on TANF cash assistance. Through partnership with the state legislature, this suspension remains in effect and is funded through June 30, 2023.
- Home visits associated with Teen Living Assessments were suspended to protect the health and safety of clients and staff. The department is currently assessing timeline and logistics for resuming these in-person assessments.
- In March 2020, CSD suspended certain Aged, Blind or Disabled (ABD) program requirements, such as verifying participation in medical treatment for a client's disabling condition(s). CSD also adopted rules to postpone disability and incapacity reviews and broaden medical evidence rules, in an effort to simplify the disability determination process for clients and reduce traffic in our community medical clinics during a public health emergency. These flexibilities continue to remain in effect through October 2022.
- In May 2021, CSD amended case-planning activities to improve engagement with ABD and Housing and Essential Needs (HEN) Referral clients and better support their goals. Case planning and treatment referrals resumed for over 3,900 ABD and HEN Referral recipients who entered the caseload after May 12, 2021. Reengagement of the remaining ABD and HEN Referral caseload began in December 2021 and has since been completed. Good cause for meeting certain eligibility requirements remains in effect throughout the public health emergency.
- Supplemental Security Income facilitation continues to be offered remotely (by mail and phone) as well as in-person in the CSO to all ABD recipients and applicable TANF families.

Medical Assistance

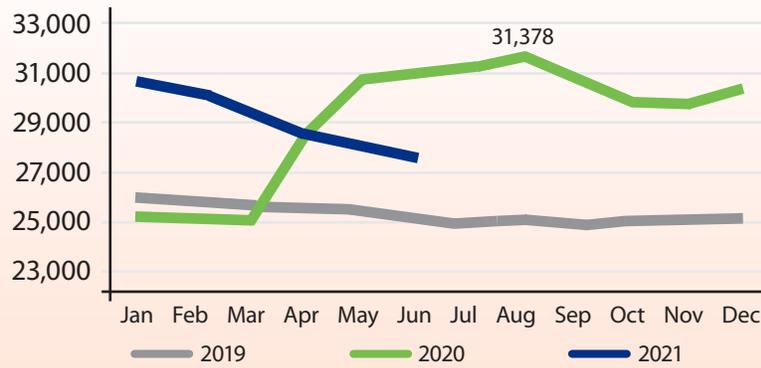
- Temporary Medicaid eligibility rules were implemented in March 2020, including 30-day extensions to provide verification of circumstances, and accepting self-attestation of income, resources and medical expenses needed to meet spenddown amounts. Certification periods for Medicaid continue to be extended in three-month increments through the end of the federal public health emergency. Medicaid coverage remains 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.

