



# Participant Handbook

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## Employment First (EF) Overview

The Employment First Program goals are to help you get the work you are looking for and lower your need for government assistance. The Employment First program was set up in 1987 to help people on food assistance find better jobs more quickly.

Colorado's EF program has three effective ways that help people get jobs:

- Improve job seeking skills
- Do volunteer work
- Stay involved in a job search support group

You will receive information about community resources to help with other things you need. If you are interested in education and training services, the local EF program will connect you.

## Employment First's goals are based on the following ideas

### Every Action Makes a Difference

The EF program is based on research studies that showed that helping people look for work had two benefits. It provided more job opportunities and resulted in less time on food assistance.

### Every Person Deserves an Opportunity

Many people getting food assistance do not qualify for any other programs and need to find a job. The EF Program shows people the best way to look for work and then arranges for volunteer experience on worksites. This work supports agencies in the community that are helping others while providing a recent work history for you. Employers can see that you are willing to work, and people who are already working are often hired for new jobs.

### Everyone Has a Choice and All Choices Have Consequences

The EF program provides information and help, but finding job openings and getting hired is up to you. The EF Program does not find you a job, but works to help you find a good job for yourself. The program makes sure that you have the knowledge and the tools to find job openings, and to tell employers about your skills and talents.

### Everyone Must Take Responsibility for Their Choices

*If you are getting food assistance and are able to work, the rules say you must work with EF to find a job.* If you choose not to keep an appointment or do not follow through with assignments, you may lose your food assistance. Losing food assistance because you have not done something you were asked to do in time is called a 'sanction.' Comply means you can fix the problem if you take required action. A sanction notice tells you why you are losing your food assistance and gives you a chance to meet program rules **before** benefits are cut off. This allows you to correct a bad decision and make a better choice.

## Who Must Participate

When you are signing up for food assistance, the FA worker decides if you or any of your FA household members must go to the EF Program. Each person required to go to EF is given an appointment for orientation. There are many reasons why a person does not have to go to E F. Anyone younger than 16 or older than 60 does not have to go to EF. Other reasons are listed below. All of these reasons require proof.

- Pregnant
- Physically or mentally unable to work
- Responsible for the care of a child under age six or a disabled person
- Employed or self-employed working 30 hours a week or making at least the minimum wage multiplied by 30 hours a week.
- Attending High School

- Attending community college, trade school or university at least half time **and** working 20 hours per week at the time you apply for Food Assistance
- Applying for or getting benefits from:
  - Colorado Refugee Service Program (CRSP)
  - Colorado Works (TANF)
  - Unemployment Insurance Benefits (UIB)
- Participating in a residential drug/alcohol treatment program more than 20 hours a week
- Participating in Vocational Rehabilitation, Workforce Investment Act (WIA) or Trade Adjustment Assistance Act Program at the time you apply for Food Assistance
- A 16 or 17-year old who is head of a household is exempt only if attending school or enrolled in an employment and training program at least half-time
- Person on temporary layoff (employer letter stating returning to work within 60 days)
- Disabled and receiving SSI, SSA or VA (100%) benefits

***If you have questions about exemptions, contact either your FA or EF worker for more information.***

***If you are exempt but do not have proof with you at orientation, your EF case manager will schedule you to come back with the proof.***

## What to Expect

### Orientation

At orientation you will learn about what you will have to do in Employment First so you can continue to get food assistance.

At the orientation meeting you will also:

- Provide information about yourself to your case manager
- Find out about EF services and about the different programs and their services
- Understand what happens if you miss any appointments
- Begin listing your strengths, work history, skills, and employment barriers

### The Paperwork

#### *Assessment*

You will answer a list of questions about your search for work and any problems you have in looking for a job. You may meet with your case manager to provide more information at this time, and talk about what kind of job you are interested in, your work history, and your education. The goal is to help you find a job you like that will support you.

#### *Activity Contract*

You and your case manager will sign an activity agreement. The agreement says what you will do next and has important details about your assignment. This is also a chance to get your questions answered including how many hours are required and what activities you need to complete.

#### *Follow-up Appointment Letter*

At the end of the orientation appointment you will receive an appointment form. It tells you what your next step is, when your next appointment is, and what happens if you don't keep your activity agreement.

#### *Timesheet*

You must turn in signed timesheets of your activity hours every month.

### **30 Day Workfare Job Search (12 hours)**

After you have been through orientation, your first assignment in Employment First is to complete one hour of community work called Workfare. For example, you may work on a project for a non-profit decorating food bags for shut-ins or packing care packages for servicemen. When the work time is over, you will leave with an appointment for a job search class and a Workfare assignment at a community agency for 8 hours.

### **Next Step**

After the job search class and the first 8 hours of Workfare, you will typically be placed on a workfare site where your hours depend on how much food assistance you get. Participants in Workfare normally are required to work up to the number of hours equal to their food assistance benefits divided by minimum wage.

There are three kinds of workfare.

➤ **Workfare-Permanent:**

This is a time to learn basic skills, improve existing job skills and give service to your community. You work on job training and experience while creating community connections and meeting possible employers. Worksites are at non-profit or public agencies.

➤ **Self-Initiated Workfare:**

This activity is for participants who are already volunteering. If you are doing volunteer work, discuss it with your case manager and ask them to make this your assigned activity. Sometimes the case manager can sign the agency up as your workfare worksite if they are willing. This will insure that you are protected if you are hurt on the job.

➤ **Work Experience**

This component is not necessarily offered in all EF counties. If it is offered in the county you are participating in, you may choose to be placed on a for-profit worksite as an unpaid intern.

### **Support Group**

Monthly support groups help connect you with other people who are looking for work. The groups provide support, resources, job leads and activities to improve your job seeking skills. These are required one hour meetings.

### **Activities**

The EF program allows other activities to help you improve your chances to find a job. Depending on your needs, interests, skills and abilities, work history and schedule, there may be opportunities to work with other community agencies to get needed education or training. The possible activities include the following:

➤ **Education:**

Basic Education, English as a Second Language, General Equivalency Diploma-GED, Literacy, Post-Secondary Education

➤ **Employability:**

This activity provides training on basic skills that improve your chances for a job. It may include exercises to improve your writing, reading, and math skills. You may work on customer service and on-the-job skills. You will complete a "Master Application" with all the information you will need for most applications. You will practice interviewing and will plan your job search.

➤ **Part-Time Job:**

This activity is used if you are already working 20 hours per week and making at least minimum wage. Your case manager will discuss any plans you have to increase your hours or look for a full-time job. You will turn in proof of the hours you work each month and may be required to attend one hour of job search each month.

➤ **Self-Employment Classes:**

This is a class for people who are interested in learning how to start their own business. Classroom attendance is required as well as homework assignments and attending appointments.

- **Vocational Rehabilitation:**  
Vocational Rehabilitation can count as your required activity. Activity hours must be reported each month.
- **Vocational Training:**  
This activity is for participants who are in training for a specific job (i.e. welding, auto mechanics, truck driving, and data entry).
- **Workforce Investment Act (WIA):**  
Any WIA program that a participant is participating in through the Workforce Center is a qualified activity.

### Supportive Services

If there is a cost directly related to your required activities and you need help to pay for it, talk with your case manager before any decision you may make for payment. Money may be approved to help you pay for an appropriate cost but will depend on the available resources in each County.

### Participation

As long as you are enrolled in the EF program, you must be participating in an activity. To get food assistance, anyone living in the household that is told to work with EF must :

- Sign the Food Assistance application
- Show up to the EF Program on the correct date and time
- Participate in all activities required by the EF office
- Go to all appointments and complete all tasks assigned by EF
- Tell the EF Program about your current employment or availability for work

### Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDS)

ABAWDS are adults between the ages of 18 and 49 with no children under 18 in the FA household. ABAWDS are allowed three months of food assistance over a three-year period. To qualify for benefits for more than three months, ABAWDS must meet a work requirement and need to:

- Participate in Employment First or report work/education/training for 20 or more hours a week or
- Participate in the county's EF Workfare Program

Note: Not all counties have ABAWD requirements. If the unemployment rate is high or there are not the right kind of jobs available, counties do not have ABAWD requirements.

## IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER

### Disqualifications

If you do not follow the Employment First (EF) rules, you could lose your Food Assistance (FA) benefits. Not following the rules is called 'Non-Compliance.' You must attend all scheduled appointments and complete all assignments. If you miss a meeting or an assignment, you must contact your EF office right away. A notice will be sent to the FA office and you could lose your food assistance benefits. **This is called a sanction.**

Examples of Non-Compliance:

- Missed appointment
- Not completing all required hours
- Not participating in an activity
- Not turning in documented verification

**IMPORTANT:** If you are sanctioned, the following things happen.

- **First sanction:** no FA benefits for one month and you must meet the EF requirements to get them again
- **Second sanction:** no FA benefits for three months and no more benefits until you meet the EF requirements

- **Third and all following sanctions: no benefits for six months and no benefits again until you meet the EF requirements**

You must contact EF before the start date of the sanction and do what you are asked to do (***again, this is called comply***). If you do not comply before the sanction starts, you will not be able to get food assistance benefits again until the sanction period ends or you become exempt. The exemption must be documented.

If you are an ABAWD and you lose your FA benefits because you already received 3 months of benefits, please contact your case manager. They will tell you what you need to do to receive benefits.

**You must complete the Comply process in order to be eligible for Food Assistance benefits again.**

### **Good Cause**

If you miss a meeting or cannot complete an assignment for reasons you cannot control, such as illness, being in jail or in the hospital, or a death in the family, contact your EF office right away. You must provide the written proof of your reason before the sanction starts in order to keep your benefits.

The sanction period begins the first month after you are notified you did not follow EF rules. You have a right to a fair hearing if you want to question any action of the Employment First Office which you believe led to a sanction by mistake. If you ask for a fair hearing, you may be able to delay the sanction.

**To ask for a fair hearing**, contact the Employment First Office or write to the Office of Administrative Courts, 633 17th St., Suite 1300, Denver, CO 80202. You have to ask for the fair hearing within 90 days of the notice of your sanction. If you request a fair hearing and contact EF before the sanction takes effect, you will not lose your benefits before a decision is made. However, if the judge says the Employment First Office was correct, you still have to serve a disqualification period. At a fair hearing you have a right to represent yourself or to be represented by a lawyer or any other person you choose. You may call your local Colorado Legal Services or Rural Legal Services for a free lawyer.

### **Tips for EF participation:**

- You have the right and are encouraged to ask your case manager for clarification on anything about the EF program or your participation at any time.
- Your case manager has the responsibility to assign you to a workfare placement that is the best site available for you to obtain the necessary experiences leading to your finding meaningful work. Make sure you discuss your employment goals and target a work site that fits your needs.
- You have the right to come up with a workfare placement on your own if it meets conditions of being a nonprofit or public entity, and you think the work experience will fit your employment goals. The site must sign an agreement and your worker needs to reach out to the site for them to understand the program and their role.
- You have the right to change your workfare sight arrangement when you feel it is no longer helpful to you or not a fit.
- You have the right to meet with your case manager to discuss any barriers in the way of your locating work to come up with possible solutions.
- Communication, communication, communication...make sure you keep your case manager informed of your needs and changes as they happen. This will allow for the best timing in doing what we can to keep you in good standing with the program.