



Repeal the RI Works 24 Month Time Limit to Promote Economic Security for Families

RI Works is the state's welfare program, providing minimal cash assistance to 4,100 low-income families with children. The goal of the program is to support families while providing pathways to economic security by providing job readiness services for parents.

Families can only participate in the program for a total of 48 months over the course of the child's life (until the child turns 18). Parents do not generally stay on the program continuously but may need the program's cash benefit and workforce services over the course of raising their children as life circumstances change. The 48 month life-time limit is shorter than the 60 months allowed under federal law and in effect in most states.

Rhode Island imposes a second time limit on families: a family can only receive 24 months of assistance within a 60 month period. This means that once a family has received benefits for 24 months, the family may not be eligible for 36 months, although families can apply for hardship benefits.

Article 15, Section 5 of the Governor's proposed FY 2020 budget would amend the RI Works law to repeal the 24 month periodic time limit. (The 48 month life time limit would remain in effect.)

Repealing the 24 month periodic limit is good policy. It would:

Provide parents sufficient time to gain skills needed to find and keep a job

Many parents need basic skills training including literacy, numeracy and English language skills, to be able to make it in the workforce. Basic skills testing of parents shows that almost half (47%) have reading levels below the 8th grade (the level needed to participate in training programs) and over three-quarters (79%) have numeracy skills below that grade level. Hundreds of parents are native Spanish speakers and need English language education in addition to basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Many parents have other challenges to address before they can work. The majority of parents who are referred to community vendors for development of an employment plan require "supportive services" as their only activity or in conjunction with another activity. Of 330 parents receiving supportive services, 75 were assessed to need physical health treatment, 82 needed behavioral health treatment (mental health and/or substance use).

Streamline program operations and ensure that parents who are ‘doing the right thing’ are able to continue with their work readiness services without a break

When parents reach the 24 month time limit, they can apply for “hardship benefits” and continue to receive the same amount of assistance as long as they continue to participate in their employment plan.

Almost all (97%) of families reaching the limit apply for hardship benefits, but there is usually a month or more break between regular benefits ending and hardship starting – this means a break in participating in the employment plan so the parent loses ground. And because these families live on the margin, the loss of even one month of assistance can start a downward spiral of instability – including homelessness.

Moreover, while eligibility for benefits is determined on a yearly basis, hardship benefits must be renewed every six months, so there is more work for Department of Human Services staff and more breaks in eligibility for the parent.

Have a miniscule cost

The Department of Human Services estimates it would cost \$64,760 in FY 2020 to repeal the 24 month time limit. This would be to cover the monthly benefit payment (\$554 for a family of 3) for families that currently drop off the program at 24 months. Funds would come from the \$96 million federal block grant – representing less than 1/10th of 1 percent of funds. No general revenue funds would be used.

Bring Rhode Island in line with all New England states and the majority of other states

Rhode Island is the only New England state to have a periodic time limit that applies to all families and only one of a handful of states around the country. Other states that apply a periodic time limit to some families are Louisiana, Nevada, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia.