

Road to YOUR SUCCESS!

1. Register with NC Works.
2. Provide goals you want to achieve while in the program.
3. Complete a professional resume.
4. Complete 2 weeks of required job search activity.
5. Submit applications to 10 jobs successfully.
6. Meet with caseworker weekly after application approval to discuss job status updates.
7. Get an Interview.
8. Accept a Job!



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Lincoln County Work First

Vision Statement

It is the vision of the Lincoln County Dept. of Social Services that all children will grow up in a supportive and safe family where economic opportunities are available to all. Families will be self-sufficient and will have resources and coping skills that will assist them in maintaining economic stability.

INTRODUCTION

As we begin our 2023-2026 Work First Family Assistance Plan, we feel it necessary to pause and reflect, as has been our practice with each new cycle. We are always optimistic that the new plan will prove successful and that we will make a difference in the lives of families. Have we critically examined each plan, reviewed our data, and understood our successes and our failures before going further? The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 permanently changed a welfare program that provided assistance to mothers and their children. This program was changed dramatically in that these mothers could no longer choose to care for their children at home. Instead, they were told to become working mothers. This was a major shift in social behaviors. Now, another 25 years later, the goal remains working, self-sufficient families. But even after all of these years of change, many parents are still not working and are still struggling to care for their families. So what does that mean for future plan?

Because we remain an Electing County, we still have the opportunity to believe in our ability to develop a program that can best serve families, and every member of the families. To be sure we have started with a review of past plans examining for successes and our failures. We have also studied the changes in the county, the economy, and the workforce. We have talked with the community college, with business owners, community partners, and the faith community. Moreover, we have engaged our families.

Today, the county is certainly in a much different place than during the past two planning cycles. The growth in population continues as does the employment opportunities. Presently, the unemployment rate is 4.2%. New businesses and growth in existing business has continued. Jobs with higher salaries are more available, and more places are currently hiring in the area.

However, has the recent pandemic left the families we serve behind? Are conditions such that this time opportunities will truly be available? Are the families ready to apply for these jobs? Are they ready to apply for any jobs? If yes, why are they not working and what do they need. If not, what do they need? Are our programs and services sufficient in today's world to take them from no to yes? Are our programs keeping pace with the positive changes in the county? Are we thinking like the millennials who are now coming through our doors?

We intend to consider these questions and others as we prepare our new plan, especially in developing our innovative programs. We know that we must find new ways

to prepare individuals for work, to convince businesses to hire our participants, to support children in educational opportunities, and to use our funds in the best ways possible. In 1996, we provided a family of three a payment for \$272. In 2021, we still provide a payment, for a family of three, of \$272.

The importance of the program cannot be the cash assistance. The importance must be the services and supports we can provide our participants and the changes they can make in their future.

Compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Interpreter Services) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973:

Lincoln County and the Department of Social Services have developed policies and practices that comply with all applicable Federal laws policies by:

- Ensuring equal access to employment programs for qualified individuals with disabilities through the provision of appropriate services;
- Adopting methods of administration which do not discriminate against and ensures equal access and opportunity to qualified individuals with disabilities; and
- Modifying policies, practices, and procedures to provide equal access that allows qualified individuals with disabilities to participate in and benefit from employment programs unless doing so would fundamentally change the program or cause an undue hardship.

We will make every effort to adequately serve individuals with disabilities. We will remain sensitive to individual needs and make accommodations when possible.

Lincoln County has developed a Language Access Policy that is in compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. The plan, approved by the State Division of Social Services, ensures that individuals who require interpretation and/or translating services will be accommodated. The Hispanic population has reached the threshold of greater than 5% and, therefore, appropriate measures have been taken to serve this population. We employ one interpreter that assists with the Hispanic population. We also utilize Tele-Language Interpreters. The company provides telephone service with language on demand. Applicants are informed of this policy upon entering the agency and staff is trained accordingly. (A copy of the plan will be made available if necessary).

I. Conditions within the County

We start the development of a Lincoln County Work First plan from a more positive perspective. Over the past year and a half the county has struggled with the ongoing pandemic. Today, we can proudly speak of a remarkable unemployment rate and growing industrial parks housing international businesses. We can talk about the booming housing market, potentially adding thousands of new homes. We can talk about an airport that services jets. And we can talk about a population that continues to grow, especially with the boom on the eastern side of our county. All of this equates to many highly skilled jobs. However, the opportunities of which we speak have not translated to jobs for all of our citizens. Many do not have the desired skills required by emerging employers. To paint the true picture, many of our citizens do not have the ability to even seek employment today. Other conditions on the county affect this population's upward mobility.

Transportation continues to be challenging for many residents in Lincoln County, thus still creating obstacles to employment. Lincoln County no longer has a public route for general transportation. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak the need declined and funding was no longer available. Until these major transportation barriers are addressed and public transit is more accessible and affordable, this will remain a major obstacle to finding and keeping employment.

The county lacks affordable housing, especially in areas where the economic opportunities and/or transportation is located. Our citizens are in need of a balanced solution that will allow them to obtain and keep a job that pays a sustainable wage.

Overall, the economy is stronger, but those that remain unemployed often struggle to find and maintain full-time employment that pays a living wage. According to research conducted by the Budget and Tax Center dated August 2021:

- For a family of three, it costs \$21.01 per hour to make ends meet in our county. 28% of residents are considered low-income (less than \$51,500 for a family of four)
- 40% of renters in our county spend 30% or more of their income on rent.
- 9% of our county residents do not have health insurance.
- Our overall county poverty rate is currently 12% (10,800)
- 18% of our children live in poverty.

Below is a snapshot of Work First and public assistance programs in Lincoln County:

- 81 families were receiving Work First In August 2021. Of these, 75 included no adult in the assistance payment.
- 5 individuals are work eligible, which means that they must comply with the employment component of the program.
- Work First recipients face many barriers to employment, which include lack of transportation, criminal backgrounds, lack of education (no HSD), and physical or mental health problems.
- As of August 2021 5,552 households were receiving Food and Nutrition Services (Food Stamps)
- As of August 2021 9,910 households were receiving Family & Children's Medicaid
- As of August 2021 5,821 Households were receiving Adult Medicaid
- As of August 2021 there were 1,271 Child Support cases in Lincoln County
- Unemployment rate June 2021: 4.2%
- Unemployed people June 2021: 1,850

Many citizens remain who have not or cannot benefit from the improved economic conditions. They have limited skills, little or no work history, no high school diploma or GED. Daily challenges include: poor physical health, mental health disorders, substance use, domestic violence, poverty and homelessness. While our numbers, from a historical perspective are low, the program is as important as ever. Our Work First plan including improved services and supports will be a factor in the improving conditions in the county.

II. Planning Process

A. Planning Committee

The members of the local planning committee and the groups they represent are:

- Anthony Simpson – NC Works Career Center
- Cecilia Fredell – Vocational Rehabilitation
- Kelly Atkins – County Manager
- Thomas Mitchell – Economic Services Program Manager
- Tonya Fitch - Day Care Case Worker
- Angela Reinhardt – Work First IMC
- Mitzi Williams – Christian Ministry of Lincoln County
- Vicky Bowman- Child Support Supervisor
- Pastor Luke Johnson – Pastor and DSS Board Member

- Julie Upton- F&C Medicaid Economic Services Supervisor
- Blaine Claiborne- NC Works NEXTGEN
- Laney Paige Avery – Lincoln County Health Department
- Amy Gragg – FNS Economic Services Supervisor
- Mendie Kelly – Children Services Program Manager
- Kristal Ford – Transportation Lincoln County
- John Dancoff – LEDA
- Amanda Laverty – Current Participant

B. Public Comment

The WFFA partners and committee members were provided information regarding the plan throughout the process. For the greater community, copies were made available in the Public Library, The Citizens Center, and the Department of Social Services. Public comment was accepted for a two-week period. An article was placed in the Lincoln-times News giving locations and instructions to notify DSS for any comments.

C. Planning Development

The planning process/development began with discussions among WFFA staff, the Director, and other staff members from DSS, including Family and Children’s Medicaid, Child Support, Day Care Services, Food and Nutrition Services, Adult Services and Child Welfare.

In November 2021, a meeting was held with members from the planning committee. These members consisted of DSS Staff, local business leaders, NC Works, DSS Board, a Local Minister, Vocational Rehabilitation, other individuals, and agencies.

The purpose of this meeting was to begin a community-wide kick off conversation about the Work First program and gather ideas from different perspectives about gaps in our current service delivery and innovations we can include in the plan in the future.

Throughout the planning process, it remained clear that if the agency is working alone, our Work First plan cannot be successful. Therefore, in order to maintain timely information, stay abreast of conditions in the county, take advantage of new programs and services, and assist our citizens, collaboration must continue.

Quarterly meetings with our Planning Committee will be scheduled. Our Committee goal will remain; to advise the Work First staff on

trends, opportunities and changes within the county that affect employment and access to services.

The Plan will be presented to the Board of Commissioners on December 13, 2021 for their final approval.

III. Goals and Performance Measures

A. Statewide Work First Goal

1. **Meeting Federal Work Participation Rate for All Families**

This will remain at 50% as required. This will be achieved by working with all work eligible individuals ensuring they are placed in federally countable components and work activities and will meet the required number of hours.

2. **Meeting Federal Work Participation Rates for Two-Parent Families**

This will remain at 90% as required. All two-parent families will be active in employment services, as well as, meet the requirement of Federal countable hours.

B. County Performance Measures

1. **Employment:**

Work First staff will assist all Work First participants in obtaining employment, work experience, and educational opportunities. Our goal is for 100% of Work First participants will become and remain self-sufficient.

2. **Meeting Federal Participation Rates:**

100% of Work First Participants will be placed in activities that will provide employment services, as well as meet the requirement of Federal countable hours.

3. **Providing Employment Services:**

WFFA participants, both work eligible and child only cases will be assigned an Income Maintenance Caseworker. The participant(s), in work eligible cases, and the caseworker will complete an individual/family assessment and develop a work/educational plan. The participant(s) will receive services and supports necessary to become job ready. The immediate goal is employment; the long-term goal is self-sufficiency. The

Caseworker will also complete a Child Well Being Assessment on the children on ALL Work First cases.

Upon completion of these assessments, our Caseworker will identify barriers and needs of all family members, including the children. The more barriers we can identify and help eliminate, the greater the opportunities for achieving and sustaining self-sufficiency. Goals will be set and plans will be developed to address all needs.

For Child Only cases, the family will receive support and services needed to provide for basic, educational, medical, and social needs. Attention is paid to the welfare and safety of the children. Special attention is directed to their educational needs and success, leading to graduation. Encouragement and direction is given to secondary education.

4. Staying Off Welfare:

We will maintain contact and track successes and failures once a participant is employed. We will provide services and support, as possible to ensure success and avoid failures. We will continue to work with the community and employers as a means of assisting the families before problems become too great and employment is lost. We will promote the importance of accepting this assistance before employment is lost and we will promote the worth of this service to employers who hire WFFA participants.

5. Job Retention:

Work First participants will be monitored up to 6 months after leaving the program to determine job retention. Contacts will be made by telephone, and mail. Services will be provided to help ensure job retention. We will promote our job retention services to the employer.

6. Benefit Diversion:

All able-bodied two-parent and single parent households will be assessed and offered Benefit Diversion if a short-term benefit will alleviate an immediate crisis. Previous Work First history and employment history will be deciding factors in offering Benefit Diversion to a participant. If Benefit Diversion is not best, then regular WF benefits will be offered with full program participation and Employment Services.

Benefit Diversion, as well as all services and benefits, and full program participation will be offered to all applicants in a fair and equitable manner.

IV. Plans to Achieve the Outcome and Goals

A. Activities

1. **Employment:**

Work and self-sufficiency are still the focus of Work First. Participants will be assessed, using the DSS-5298(Strengths & Needs), DSS-5327 Learning Needs Screening, Family Violence/Domestic Violence Assessment, and Case & Characteristic Review, leading to a plan for short and long-term goals, and the steps needed to reach these goals. Work First staff, and community partners, including, but not limited to Gaston College, NC Works, Vocational Rehabilitation and other area businesses will work together to provide the services needed for success in achieving the employment goal. If it is deemed from assessments that participant is not prepared for employment and the workplace, work experience, job readiness classes, and GED programs will be provided.

Meeting Federal Participation Rate:

By using a combination of components/ activities: more work experience sites, increased individualized supports, trainings and increased cooperation with community partners, Lincoln County plans to meet the participation rate. Work First participants will have an initial assessment completed by our Work First Caseworker during their first visit. The Caseworker will open a dialogue about the Work First program and the expectations of both the participant and Work First program. From this dialogue, the participant and caseworker will establish a plan of action for job readiness and/or employment. Participants will be placed in components that meet countable hours in the Federal Participation Rate. We hope to increase the opportunity of useful hours.

2. **Providing Employment Services:**

From the initial assessment, the caseworker will identify the strengths and needs of the participants. The needs will be addressed in order to overcome/eliminate any barriers that may be prohibiting employment. Guidance, support and training in work ethics, interviewing skills, online application assistance, resume writing, dress code and professional attire and mock interviews will be offered. Participants may also be referred to

classes/training at NC Works, as well as CRC certifications. Vocational Rehabilitation offers psychological evaluations. In collaboration with our community partners, positive outcomes, including employment are the common factor with our programs.

3. Staying off Welfare/Retention:

Our Work First Family Assistance plan will continue to offer services and supports to participants who have left the program due to employment. Individuals will be encouraged to maintain contact or re-connect with staff if/when help is needed. Our caseworker will reengage, providing support to resolve issues threatening employment. Our staff will educate employers about difficulties facing our participants; especially single parents, parents with a sick child, the lack of day care services or the lack of transportation. All efforts to bring understanding to both participants and employers will help in the retention of jobs.

Work First in conjunction with Gaston Community Action will offer financial counseling to all current and previous Work First participants. The desire is to help all individuals learn to manage their money, learn to save, take advantage of banking/financial/credit opportunities, in order to become and remain self-sufficient, without the need to return to WFFA.

4. Benefit Diversion:

All able-bodied two parent households, as well as single parent households, will be assessed for Benefit Diversion if they are eligible for WFFA. A thorough assessment of their present situation and their readiness for employment will be completed before offering Benefit Diversion. Assistance other than financial, i.e. budgeting, banking education, medical needs, and housing will be provided. Diversion of 1-3 months, depending on the circumstances and starting date of employment will be approved. Benefit Diversion will only be approved to meet a specific family crisis or episode of need and not for ongoing recurrent needs.

B. Supportive Services

Supportive Services will be offered to enable individuals to fully participate in the activities listed above. These services will be offered by DSS: Work First, Daycare, Food and Nutrition, Medicaid, Child Support, Child Welfare, NC Works, Vocational Rehabilitation, Mental Health and other various agencies.

V. Administration

A. Authority

The Lincoln County Board of Commissioners authorized responsibility to the local Department of Social Services for the administration of the Work First Program.

B. Organization

1. In-Take:

- a. Upon arrival, participants will see our IMC worker to discuss the program and complete their application. Therefore, no appointment is required to see a worker.
- b. Participants will speak with the caseworker during the application to discuss their situation, complete assessments, discuss program requirements /activities and develop a Mutual Responsibility Agreement/Outcome Plan.
- c. After participants complete the WF application process, they will meet with a Child Support agent at the next available time.

2. Emergency Assistance:

Applications are taken at the Department of Social Services by any eligibility caseworker or social worker aware of a need. Eligibility criteria will remain unchanged at 200% of poverty level. Budget will remain as long as funding allows. Emergency Assistance cannot be used to cover medical care. Maximum annual benefits will not exceed \$500.00 without the Director's approval.

3. Formal Assessments:

Assessments, such as job readiness assessments are conducted by the Work First Caseworker in collaboration with NC Works, Vocational Rehabilitation, and other partners, as needed.

4. Employment Services:

Work First Employment Services has developed partnerships with NC Works, Vocational Rehabilitation and area businesses to increase participant employability. Participants will also receive guidance in completing a career tool called Career Headlight to match them with in-demand local careers, education and skills training. This tool will also be available to our teenagers to prepare them for their future.

To motivate and reward our participants for their hard work we will offer “Road to Your Success”, which will provide them with incentives such as a gift card once they complete various milestones within their job search.

For those participants who report that they have mental health and/or physical health issues that may prevent and/or restrict them from job search and/or working an assessment will be conducted to determine if they meet criteria for completing a Functional Capacity Evaluation. If they have been out of work for an extended period of time and their Report of Medical Examination- DSS 8655 indicates that this will continue for a long period they will be referred for a Functional Capacity Evaluation. This will be very beneficial to those clients that are determined to be unable to work because this evaluation will be an important tool in applying for Social Security Disability.

5. Other Supportive Services:

Work First Caseworker will provide assessments, social work services and support, eligibility services, and other services as needed. Some examples of supportive services that will be provided are: childcare, transportation, participation expenses (mileage reimbursement, car repair, uniforms, work clothes, etc.), child support, and food and nutrition. Allocated amount for Participation Assistance is \$6,500 + additional funds as available.

6. Eligibility Determination:

To be determined by Work First Unit as indicated in Section B1 while utilizing all Federal, State, and Local policies and procedures for eligibility determinations.

C. Child Care

WFFA applicants will be referred to the Child Day Care Unit for consideration of subsidy funds. Our funding has decreased and with our unemployment rate at 4.2%, the demand in Lincoln County has increased significantly. We now have a waiting list while at the same time we do not have WFFA dollars to support this need. While we will assist applicants when possible, we will continue with our priority order listed below. Work First applicants will be exempt from work requirements until daycare can be provided. The Work First Caseworker will meet bi-weekly with these participants to update any changes in their situations.

The waitlist for day care subsidy is listed below. As indicated, Work First remains third in priority. These funds are monitored closely to ensure participants are afforded day care as soon as possible, understanding this will be the difference in parents being able to work. MOE funds will be made available for day care services when possible.

1. Child Protective Services/Homelessness
2. Foster Care
3. Work First
4. Employed parents
5. Training and education parents
6. Child with developmental needs

D. Transportation

The lack of public transportation has long been an issue in Lincoln County. Allocated amount is \$1,500 + additional funds as available.

Participation funds will be used to support ride sharing as well as funding car repairs, car insurance, etc.

E. Substance Abuse and other Services

We have continued to work closely with our LME, and the private providers to ensure families receive appropriate assessments and services. Our WFFA staff meet/talk regularly with providers regarding services to participants with substance abuse needs. A copy of our Memorandum of Agreement with our LME is included. We will follow the directives from Dear County Director Letter EFS-WF-13-2012 for the Statewide MOA with Vocational Rehabilitation.

F. Family Violence Option

When a family presents to the department with a family violence concern, we will take immediate action to assist. An assessment will be completed to evaluate the participant's situation and to determine the extent to which the violence is an impediment to self-sufficiency. The assessment must be administered in a private and confidential setting. No partners may be in attendance at the assessment. The assessment evaluates the participant's ability to work or participate in required Work First activities, the extent and volatility of the situation, the barriers to self-sufficiency and the needed services. A waiver is available to a participant who is unable to comply with Work First requirements due to the problem of family violence. A waiver may be granted once a full assessment is completed by a family violence

professional. If a waiver is deemed necessary, the county will follow Work First manual section 104D and all steps will be taken to protect the participant and child (ren). We will refer victims of family violence to Amy's House (local domestic violence shelter), Pathways LME Intake Hotline, and other community resources and services. The assistance of Child Welfare Services will be requested as needed to assess the safety of the participant children affected by family violence. A waiver is granted for a participant who is unable to comply with Work First requirements due to the problem of family violence.

G. Maintenance of Effort (MOE)

Maintenance of Effort will remain at the present level and will continue to support services to Work First families and agency employment social work and income maintenance staff. Services to families might include, but are not limited to: emergency assistance, child and family enrichment, supportive services such as transportation assistance, child care, uniforms, tools, etc.

H. Child Welfare Services

A collaborative effort will be made between Children's Services and the Work First unit. We will share information to make the best decision with our families thus ensuring self-sufficiency and safety for all who participate with both programs.

CPS Intake checks the NC Fast system for Work First participation when a case is accepted for assessment, in-home services, or foster care. Work First will utilize the 5027 system to determine involvement with Children's Services at the initial assessment. Work First staff will contact CPS Intake as needed for this function.

Contact between workers for each unit is initiated when participation with both the CPS and Work First unit is established to determine the best course of action to prevent unattainable goals and unnecessary restrictions.

The safety assessments, risk assessments and MRA/Outcome Plan will be shared.

The amount of our Work First Block Grant earmarked for our Child Welfare Services is estimated at \$741,682. If available, funds are transferred from our Cash Savings to help fund the remaining dollars needed for our Child Welfare staff.

VI. Emergency Assistance

We will use funds as available to assist families as needed.

We have maintained four budget line items within the Emergency Services program:

- Emergency Assistance - \$5,130 + additional funds as available
- Child Family Enrichment - \$6,000 + additional funds as available
- Travel Assistance - \$1,500 + additional funds as available
- Participation Assistance - \$6,500 + additional funds as available

Eligibility for Emergency Assistance remains at 200% of poverty, and funds are available to assist families in crisis, working parents to remain employed or become employed, and/or assist and support their children to remain in the home, remain in school, or with special needs. EA will not be used for medical care.

The county's procedure for determining eligibility will remain the same as the State's eligibility policy.

- Maximum \$500.00 (annually) given for circumstances that meet the criteria, any amount above maximum must be approved by the Director.
- Gross income at or below 200% of poverty.
- Income to be verified.
- Emergency to be verified and resolved with assistance
- Resource limit is the same as Work First eligibility guidelines.

At the time of Emergency Assistance, application worker will obtain copy of all bills and indebtedness. Each time and individual applies for Emergency Assistance, the caseworker will council with them on ways to alleviate the current emergency and strategies to prevent future similar emergencies. Assistance may be provided more than once if a different emergency occurs or there was a change in situation.

Families who experience a financial emergency may be eligible for assistance. Examples of such needs include, but not limited to, rent, utilities, and deposits, such as electricity, gas, and water. These funds are not used for heating or cooling emergencies. Emergency Assistance cannot be used for medical care. Maximum annual benefits will not exceed \$500.00 without Director's approval.

Families that meet the following criteria may be eligible for EA:

- There must be a child in the household that meets Work First age requirements.
- Total family income must be at or below 200% poverty level. (income to be verified)
- Citizenship requirements mirror Work First policy.
- Benefits must be used to eliminate the emergency.

VII. Services to Low Income Families (under 200% of poverty)

We will provide services to our families at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level. We intend to provide Work First Block Grant funds for any services that help families alleviate emergencies, support self-sufficiency, and provide for the needs of the children. Eligibility criteria will be the same as for Emergency Assistance.

Any services that would be provided to Work First participants will be provided for any families at or below 200% of poverty level as well as any preventive services provided by the Child Protective Services units. Current Work First participant receiving checks are not eligible for 200% services.

Services offered include services and activities that enhance parents' and children's' ability to become self-sufficient, properly care for children, and enhance school performance and behavior, self-esteem and leadership skills, and family relationships. Examples of such services include, but are not limited to, after-school mentoring and tutoring, parenting skills, summer enrichment programs and family counseling services.

We will also continue to serve the children of child-only cases with all available resources.

As stated in Emergency Assistance, Section VI, we have maintained four budget line items within the Emergency Services program:

- Emergency Assistance - \$5,130 + additional funds as available
- Child Family Enrichment - \$6,000 + additional funds as available
- Travel Assistance - \$1,500 + additional funds as available
- Participation Assistance - \$6,500 + additional funds as available

VIII. Services to Non-Custodial Parents

We provide services to non-custodial parents using WFFA Block Grant funds. Services, including employment and support, are provided upon request and/or referred by the Child Support unit as non-complying with court orders.

IX. Exemption from the Work Requirement

- New Birth Exemption - 3-month exemption from the work requirements.
- No available childcare slots and/or childcare funds:
If no funds are available, the participant will be placed on the waiting list and contacted as soon as possible.

During the 3-month exemption, Work First participants will be seen monthly by a Work First Caseworker. The Caseworker assesses the family for any needs or barriers they may have to employment and works to eliminate them before the exemption period ends. Within the last two weeks of exemption and prior to the end of the 3-month exemption, the Caseworker and Work First participant(s) will meet and discuss employment requirements and daycare options. A new Mutual Responsibility Agreement/Outcome Plan will be developed and signed by Work First Caseworker and Work First participants.

Optional Plan Elements

X. Innovative County Strategies

1. Employment Strategies

In an effort to keep the Work First program relevant and innovative, we stay informed of issues affecting our community while continually seeking ideas to best serve our participants. With technology advancing rapidly and the face of our industrial and work opportunities evolving, we must stay engaged with all aspects of our community if our program is to remain relevant and successful.

It is known that our participants can't sustain themselves and their family on the small amount of money Work First provides. It is the responsibility of the program to ensure that opportunities for advancement are available. Consistent assessments of participant's needs and progress will be performed regularly to ensure these opportunities are made available.

Given the present conditions in the county, the needs of our families today, and the available TANF funding, we offer the following innovations in our Work First Family Assistance plan beginning in 2023.

When families present to the agency, they will discuss the Work First Program and complete their application with our Work First Caseworker. The Caseworker will then complete assessments and the MRA/Outcome Plan. From these conversations and assessments, we can determine:

1. Job readiness, work history, and recent efforts to locate employment
- Or
2. Services and supports needed to become job ready
- And
3. Any special circumstances in the family that will require additional/special attention.
4. Educational levels and skills including technology skills
5. Disabilities and/or health issues
6. Family/community supports
7. Other factors that could prevent employment

With these assessments completed, we will refer to:

Employment Services and Supports.

A. Employment Services and Supports:

When it is determined that a participant is not ready to find and maintain employment, we will assist them as needed to overcome situations/issues.

Services will include, but will not be limited to:

- Training/Educational Opportunities, including navigating the community college system and grant writing
- Physical/Behavioral Health services referrals made
- Health tips and dietary information
- Housing assistance.
- Personal appearance and wardrobe tips
- Services and supports for their children
- Day care assistance while preparing for employment.

It is important for the family to establish and maintain a safe and stable home environment for success to occur. We will support this as possible.

2. Child Only Cases

In Lincoln County, we will continue our long established services to the Child Only families beginning with complete assessments of circumstances and appropriateness of the child placement. This will include, but not be limited to, immediate interviews with all adults and child(ren). These interviews will continue at a minimum of every 6 months or more often if necessary. A child well-being assessment, safety assessments and permanency plans will be completed along with an assessment of the physical and emotional needs of the child/family (furniture, clothing, school needs, and services for caregivers including counseling, legal issues, medical/mental issues, financial training and others). All information will be used to prepare a family centered service plan.

Often the custodian has taken children who would otherwise be in foster care. Therefore our interest is to help the relative caretaker financial stress. We will continue to assist these families with monetary support as well as other services deemed necessary. Our child only cases and their needs are as important to us as any regular Work First case. The permanent stable home is essential if these children are to remain in school and become successful in adulthood. They will be supported in school by way of tutors, funding for extra-curricular activities, summer camps, clothing, appearance enhancement, nutritional training and exercise. Again, our focus is to help these children gain confidence, improve/maintain grades, and know success. This is how we will break the cycle of welfare.

Our Work First Caseworker will work closely with these children to ensure that they have their needs met and can be confident in their educational and extra-curricular activities. Educational and skills training for teenagers will be provided. The Caseworker will work collaboratively with the school system, Communities in Schools and our Kinship Placement Social Worker.

3. Incentives

With the understanding that incentives increase motivation and obtaining goals set forth, LCDSS has developed two incentive programs.

Adult Incentive Program – The Road to Success

This program will be used to provide incentives to adults participating in employment services. We intend to reward participants for job readiness skill advancement and extra effort put forth in their search for permanent employment and self-sufficiency.

Incentives will be in the form of gift cards that will allow participants to purchase personal items, or to spoil themselves as a result of their successful efforts. There are eight (8) activities along the way and three (3) rewards (See Road to Success at the front of this plan).

Youth Incentive Program –

The youth incentive program is less structured than the adult program to allow for flexibility for each unique child. The incentives are similar and will be given as progress is made toward achieving their educational goals. Our caseworker will begin engaging with youth aged 14 and up to begin the discussion and goal planning for their future. The purpose of these incentives is to help instill a strong work ethic (success brings reward) at an early age. We also hope to emphasize the education or the work experience needed to achieve their future goals and dreams.

XI. Special Issues

The unemployment rate in Lincoln County while greatly improving has not proved helpful to our participants and to our program. In spite of the rate being at 4.2%, our families still find locating a job difficult. Many have been unemployed for months to years and others have never developed a work history. Available jobs are not necessarily available to our WFFA recipients. Special assistance and help is necessary if these families are ever to be successfully employed. One major problem is the lack of a high school diploma or GED. This issue will require cooperation with Gaston Community College and Lincoln Economic Development Association to change attitudes and beliefs. Perhaps every job does not require a diploma. Maybe through the refining or addition of Adult Education Classes jobs can be assessable.

In August 2021, 5,552 households received Food and Nutrition Services, 9,910 families (cases) received Medicaid, 2,549 families received Child

Support services, 406 children received day care subsidy assistance, 47 reports were accepted for assessment/investigation of neglect/abuse services, 29 families received CPS case management services, and 85 children were in foster care.

XII. Eligibility Criteria

- 1. Definition of Relationships:** Same as the State definition of family relationships.
- 2. Who Can Apply/ Be Included in the Payment:** Same as the State policy.
- 3. Payment Levels:** Same as State policy.
- 4. Countable Income:** Same as State policy
- 5. Sanctions:** Same as State policy.
- 6. Resource Requirements:** Same as State policy
- 7. Time Limits and Extensions:** Same as State Policy.
- 8. Exemptions and Exceptions to Requirements:** Same as State policy.
- 9. Benefit Diversion Requirements:** Able-bodied single parent and two-parent households being considered for Benefit Diversion must have employment (35 hours per wk.) beginning within 2 weeks of WF application. Benefit Diversion will be approved for 1-3 months depending on circumstances and assessment of needs.
- 10. Reward Incentives:** Adult and youth incentive programs as explained above.
- 11. Child Support:** All applicants seeking cash assistance for children with an absent parent are referred to Child Support immediately after signing an application for Work First. This will preserve the application date. Non-cooperation with Child Support will not impact the application process. It will, however, prevent them from receiving Work First cash assistance except in those special situations noted in policy.

XIII. Appeals Process

We will continue the process in place as we continue to feel it is appropriate. The emphasis remains on the efforts to assist our families in understanding the process, listening very carefully to their information and affording them the opportunity to be heard.

Introduction

In accordance with the Lincoln County Department of Social Services Work First Family Assistance Plan, and G.S.108-A 79 the following appeals process has been developed. The process will occur on two levels, the first within the agency and the second by a hearing board as appointed by the Board of Social Services.

First Level

The First Level of the appeals process occurs within the Department and will occur in two stages.

A. First Stage

The first stage consists of an informal conference between the client, the caseworker, and unit supervisor. The conference will be offered to any WFFA client who voices dissatisfaction with a decision. The conference will be scheduled within 48 hours, or as the client requests. The conference will allow for more in-depth discussion of the decision with review by the supervisor.

If the supervisor finds an agency error or if the client provides additional information that changes a decision, the changes will be made by the caseworker.

If the decision stands and the client is still dissatisfied, the client will be offered access to a Stage 2 hearing.

B. Second Stage

Following the informal conference, the client will be provided information regarding the Second Stage appeals process. The client may file, within 60 days, a written request for a hearing. This hearing will be scheduled within 5 days. The hearing, a formal process, will involve an impartial local hearings officer, an impartial income maintenance supervisor or designee, and the agency Director or designee, but always three individuals. These individuals will be known as the Agency Hearing Board.

The hearing will be conducted by the rules of the Handbook On Public Assistance Appeals for County Departments of Social Services. The client will be given 60 days to notify caseworker that an appeal is requested. Following receipt of this request, the hearing will be scheduled within 5 days or at the client's earliest convenience. The Agency Hearing Board's decision will be sent to the client by certified mail, within 5 days.

Second Level

If the Agency Hearing Board upholds the department's decision and the client remains dissatisfied, information will be provided regarding the second level appeals process.

Upon receipt of the Agency Hearing Board's decision, the client will have 15 days to file an appeal. The second level evidentiary hearing will be conducted by the Board of Social Services. Beyond the first and second levels of appeal, the client may then seek judicial review.

XV. Review Prior To Exemption of Time Limits

Lincoln County will follow standard procedures to ensure that all Work First cases are evaluated at the appropriate times, and that all time clocks are correct. Time clocks will be checked on a monthly basis and adjustments to time clocks will be made when necessary. Work First families will be informed in writing about all the public assistance benefits and services, including Medicaid, after their eligibility for cash assistance expires. Also, understanding the difficulties finding employment, we will carefully examine every case to ensure all families are given the needed resources and support in order to maintain family stability.

XVI. Funding Requirements

While we have maintained our county share and county responsibility, State and Federal dollars have continued to decline. We understand that caseloads have declined but would argue that the services, programs, and support for the most troubled families and now many others, given the present economic situation, should not decline! We wish to and intend to continue services while increasing our efforts to provide a quality program, meet participant rates, and remain family centered. Therefore we need all supports to do so. As an Electing County, we are currently budgeting 90% of our Maintenance of Effort. We will meet the budgetary needs of the WFFA program. All savings and Federal dollars will continue to be used as needed to support staffing in Children's Services and other Work First services. At a time when families are most in need, funds are not

available to extend support and assistance. Therefore, we must make changes in the program as possible to make the funds count.

Current and Requested Budget

Work First Benefit Diversion	\$10,000
Work First Family Assistance (Cash)	\$265,000
Work First Family Assistance (Subsidized Employment and Employment Services and Support)	\$70,000
Employment Services and Support	\$5,000
Work First/Children's Services	\$741,682
Maintenance of Effort Contribution	\$477,424
Total	\$1,569,106

Employment Services and Support include:

Child Incentives and services	\$3,000
Adult Incentives and services	\$2,000
	<hr/>
	\$5,000

MOE includes:

Child only Cases	\$20,000
Emergency Assistance	\$5,130
Child Family Enrichment	\$6,000
Travel Assistance	\$1,500
Participation Assistance	\$6,500
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	\$39,130