# CALDWELL COUNTY
# WORK FIRST BLOCK GRANT PLAN
# 2026 – 2028

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## I. CONDITIONS WITHIN THE COUNTY

Caldwell County is the 48th largest county in North Carolina by population. Caldwell County experienced a population increase between 2021 and 2022 of 0.0136%. The population was 80,705 in 2021, and it increased to 80,716 in 2022. There are eight incorporated communities ranked by population as follows: Lenoir, Sawmills, Granite Falls, Gamewell, Hudson, Cajah's Mountain, Rhodhiss and Cedar Rock. Caldwell County also experienced a 7.85% increase in the median household income from 2021 to 2022. The median household income grew from $48,549 in 2021 to $52,362 in 2022. (https://datausa.io/profile/geo/caldwell-county-nc/)

In 2023 13.3% of Caldwell County's 80,705 population lived below the poverty line. Caldwell County's average was 6.4% higher than the national average which was 12.5%. The largest demographic living in poverty were females within the ages of 25-34, followed by females within the ages of 35-44 and then males within the ages of 6-11. The most common racial or ethnic group living below the poverty line during this time was Caucasian followed by Hispanic and other.
(https://datausa.io/profile/geo/caldwell-county-nc/)

Caldwell County Employment grew at a rate of 1.43% from 2021 to 2022. This resulted in an increase from 35,900 employees to 36,400 employees. The most common job sectors in Caldwell County by the number of people living in the county are:

- Manufacturing (26.65% - 8,607 employees),
- Retail Trade (11.72% - 4,265 employees),
- Health Care and Social Assistance (11.68% - 4,253 employees)

(https://datausa.io/profile/geo/caldwell-county-nc/)

Caldwell County's unemployment rate has seen steady improvement over the years

| Month / Year | County Rate | State Rate | National Rate |
|---|---|---|---|
| January 2020 – December 2020 | 6.5% | 7.2% | 8.1% |
| January 2021 – December 2021 | 3.5% | 4.9% | 5.3% |
| January 2022 – December 2022 | 3.4% | 3.7% | 3.6% |
| January 2023- December 2023 | 3.4% | 3.5% | 3.6% |
| January – October 2024 | 3.6% | 3.7% | 4.1% |

( https://www.nccommerce.com/ )

On Thursday, October 10, the community is invited to attend the Family-Friendly Manufacturing Career Night, hosted by Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute (CCC&TI) at the Broyhill Center for Advanced Technology. This free event, sponsored by Exela Pharma Sciences, is designed to immerse young students and their families in manufacturing through hands-on exhibits, demonstrations, and conversations with industry professionals. The event will feature interactive displays that focus on the mechanical and engineering aspects of manufacturing, allowing students to see firsthand how various technologies are used in production. Representatives from local manufacturers will be available to discuss job opportunities and pathways, including the importance of post-secondary training and technical education. Students can also win door prizes, including Amazon and Walmart gift cards, making the event even more engaging for families. Thanks to Exela Pharma Sciences, dinner will be provided during the open house, making it a welcoming event for the whole family. The open house perfectly complements the classroom presentations, giving students and their parents/guardians a broader understanding of the real-world applications of manufacturing careers and the local resources available to help them pursue those careers.

Caldwell County's commitment to manufacturing is clear. By working closely with schools, community colleges, and local manufacturers, Caldwell County Economic Development aims to inspire and educate students about the possibilities that await them in the manufacturing industry. Through these events, students and families will learn about various career paths and the critical role manufacturing plays in the county's economic development. Join us this Manufacturing Week to celebrate the local manufacturers driving Caldwell County forward and to learn more about the exciting and rewarding careers that manufacturing offers!
(https://www.caldwelledc.org/news/p/item/59748/inspiring-future-innovators-caldwell-county-celebrates-national-manufacturing-week)

One of the big issues within Caldwell County is a lack of transportation. On Monday August 5, 2024 Greenway public transportation started an on demand ride service for parts of Caldwell County. This is a piolet project for a new micro-transit zone in Caldwell County. Those within the zone could purchase on demand transportation services for the price of $2.50 per ride between 7 a.m. and 5 p.m. The zone is part of an initiative by the company and by local municipalities to improve the quality of transportation available to county residents, said Greenway mobility manager Kaylan Kelley. The pilot project started on Monday, Aug. 5, with a single driving serving a roughly triangular zone that covers Lenoir, Hudson, portions of Cajah's Mountain and Gamewell (along Morganton Boulevard and to the east), according to an interactive map found through mygreenway.org.

(https://www.newstopicnews.com/archives/greenway-public-transportation-starts-on-demand-ride-service-for-parts-of-caldwell-county/article_697b9aba-e02c-597c-8add-9bff05f595f0.html

## II. PLANNING PROCESS

### A. Planning Committee

Planning committee task force members invited to participate in the planning and development of the Caldwell County Electing Plan included representatives from the Board of Social Services, Caldwell County Schools, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, RHA, Workforce Development, local community partners and others.

**Planning Committee Members**

1. Megan Parsons, Vocational Rehabilitation
2. Sharon Harmon, Yokefellow
3. Kim Anderson, NC Works Career Center
4. Christyn Grant, Jonas Hill
5. Brittany Bonn, Helping Hands
6. Tracy Irvine, RHA
7. Shellie Bowlin, Robin's Nest Child Advocacy Center
8. Ryan Cooper, Caldwell County Schools
9. Aaron Smith, BRCA
10. Brandy Dunlap, CCC&TI
11. Ashley Bolick, Workforce Development
12. Keith Hindman, Communities in Schools
13. Michael Bowman, Greenway
14. Hannah Romero, Smart Start
15. Lisa Clontz, Shelter Home
16. Dustin Burleson, VAYA Health
17. Anna Cook, Public Health
18. Bryan Moore, Chamber of Commerce
19. Mandy Woody, Childcare Subsidy DSS
20. Laura Harrison, Child Welfare DSS
21. Bryon Robbins, Child Support DSS
22. Callie Sherrill, WFFA DSS
23. Mary Patterson, Emergency Assistance DSS
24. Jennifer Compaleo, FNS DSS
25. Chris Conley, Business Operations DSS
26. Crystal Henderson, Staff Development DSS
27. Kim Arnett, Director DSS
28. Jerrell Suddreth, DSS Board
29. Chapel Davis, DSS Board
30. Donnie Potter, DSS Board, County Commissioner
31. Diane Dunn, DSS Board

## B. Public Comment

The plan was made available for public comment period between February 3, 2025 and February 7, 2025. The plan was placed on the county website as well as a copy for viewing and comment was made available at the Caldwell County Department of Social Services. An article was placed in the county newspaper (The News-Topic) and information was included on the county television network.

## C. Planning Development

The Caldwell County Board of Commissioners unanimously voted to request Electing Status for the Work First Program for fiscal years 2025-2028 at their February 10, 2025 regular board meeting. A task force/planning committee was approved, selected, and organized to develop a plan for Caldwell County's new Electing County Block Grant cycle. When we invited our planning committee we made it clear that we wanted to work with our community partners on ways that we could use these funds to better support employment families as well as our child only cases. We wanted to focus on all community resources across our county.

On January 22, 2025 the Planning Committee Task Force held a virtual meeting, due to scheduling concerns, to discuss our current plan and discuss our new proposed plan ideas and needs of the community. During this meeting, social services staff reviewed the Work First program, its goals, and some of the basic policy guidelines required in the program. Staff also reviewed how the electing county process is different and asked for guidance and feedback from the planning committee on how the program could better serve families in Caldwell County.

During this discussion, our community partners focused on several areas.

Transportation- In Caldwell County there are no designed transportation routes and much of the county is rural, which can make it harder on families with no transportation. We discussed the need to make sure there were options available to families who were struggling with transportation. We agreed that the agency should use its resources to provide more assistance with fuel vouchers, reimbursement of fuel expenses, vehicle repairs, and referrals to transportation providers in our area.

Communication and Technology- In our current environment, technology and communication are key for families to be able to access resources, engage in education, and participate in the jobs market. We want to ensure that our program helps families gain, or keep, access to cell phones and the internet.

Technology training- Along with access to technology and communication, the planning committee wanted to make sure our families had access to the training needed to manage technology. Many older adults may need some additional assistance with technology education so they can access services and resources as well as assist their children in education.

Mental Health- It was discussed that many younger parents may need assistance in accessing resources for their own mental health needs so they could maximize their parenting skills as well as being prepared for employment.
Child Care- Work First can assist with childcare, but our community partners thought it would be good for families to also have access to short-term babysitter type childcare to help them be more flexible so they can make use of, and access, other types of resources in the community like mental health or medical appointments.
The planning committee discussed making sure social services staff were open to working with families in all of these areas and using our Work First Emergency Assistance funds when needed to assist families where regular Work First funds may not normally be spent. The planning committee members agreed to continue to pass on more input to our staff as they encountered barriers in their work with families and to be open to further discussions in the future about how to better assist the families we serve, including child only cases.

## III. GOALS AND PERFORMANCE MEASURES

### A. Statewide Work First Goals

There are two (2) goals for North Carolina's Work First Program, and State Law requires an Electing County to achieve these goals. If a county fails for two (2) consecutive years to meet its Work First program goals, or fails to comply with a corrective action plan developed pursuant to state law, and as a result the federal government imposes a penalty upon the State. At this time the county shall lose electing county status. Caldwell County adopts these goals listed below.

1. Meeting Federal Work Participation Rates for All Families

Active participation in employment services and activities will lead to full-time employment. Counties must ensure that at least 50% of all work eligible Individuals, as defined by federal rule, complete the required number of hours of federally countable work activities. Work First case managers provide applicants an overview of the Work First program at application. The case manager begins working with work eligible Individuals at application by identifying obstacles and/or barriers that could impede the participant's success in the program. The case manager works with applicants at this initial visit to develop a plan for locating employment (preferably full-time employment) and achieving self-sufficiency. The case manager will make appropriate and necessary referrals to assist applicants in achieving success. Together, the Work First case manager and applicant develop the first Mutual Responsibility Agreement (MRA) at application to begin this process.

The Case Manager will meet with applicants frequently, typically weekly, to review progress in the program and to make any adjustments in goals. The case manager will continually reassess a family's situation to identify if any new

referrals may be needed to help the family in achieving self-sufficiency. Meeting with participants on a regular basis helps to build rapport between the applicant and case manager. The case manager is invested in the participant's success in life and in the Work First program.

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

Active participation in employment services and activities will lead to full-time employment. Counties must ensure that at least 90% of all two-parent families with work eligible individuals, as defined by federal rule, complete the required number of hours of federally countable work activities.

The Work First case manager will provide applicants an overview of the Work First program at application. The case manager begins working with work eligible Individuals at application by identifying obstacles and/or barriers that could impede the participant's success in the program. The case manager works with applicants at this initial visit to develop a plan for locating employment (preferably full-time employment) and achieving self-sufficiency. The case manager makes appropriate and necessary referrals to assist applicants in achieving success. Together, the Work First case manager and applicant develop the first Mutual Responsibility Agreement (MRA) at application to begin this process.

The case manager will meet with applicants frequently, typically weekly, to review progress in the program and to make any adjustments in goals. The case manager will continually reassess a family's situation to identify if any new referrals may be needed to help the family in achieving self-sufficiency. Meeting with participants on a regular basis helps to build rapport between the applicant and case manager. The case manager is invested in the participant's success in life and in the Work First program.

## B. County Performance Measures

Caldwell County will document our progress toward performance measures as stated below:

1. Employment

Self-sufficiency will be obtained primarily through the employment of Work First participants.

The case manager will assist Work First participants in obtaining full-time employment status through readiness classes, job preparation, mentoring, coaching, and job searching. Participants may also be placed in a work experience that could potentially lead to employment. All activities will be entered for the federal countable hours and with case documentation. Employment is the goal of the Work First Program which is expressed by the case manager to the

participant at application and is continually reiterated during follow-up appointments and reviews.

2. Meeting Federal Participation Rates

Active participation in federal countable work activities will lead to full-time employment. The case manager will ensure that individuals participating in the employment component of the Work First program are placed in countable federal activities. The case manager will meet with participants frequently to collect time sheets and/or other verifications to verify activities are completed and hours are earned. The earned hours are keyed into NC Fast to be counted towards their participation rate. The supervisor will monitor the cases and reports to ensure that the activities are recorded and the hours are keyed. Should the participant be deemed as out of compliance with the Mutual Responsibility Agreement (MRA), per policy, a Work First payment will not be issued.

Federal Law has determined an “All-Parent” participation rate of 50%, in which Caldwell County will continue to maintain. The county will strive to maintain a “Two-Parent” participation rate of 90%. This is documented by the participation rate monthly after activities and hours are entered into NC Fast.

3. Providing Employment Services

Active participation in intensive employment services for all families is necessary to meet the participation rate and to ensure families are served adequately before the end of five (5) years. A way to measure the success of Work First is the percentage of families who are subject to the work requirement that counties are assisting with job preparation and placement.

The state goal is for the county to provide employment services to 50% of All-Parent households and 90% of Two-Parent households.

Caldwell County will provide information, referrals, case management, employment counseling, child care assistance, transportation, and participation expenses to promote employment. The Case Manager will document the case file as to what has been provided to the participants in order to help promote employment.

4. Staying Off Welfare

Efforts to reduce welfare rolls, help adults find jobs, and increase self-sufficiency are undermined when families return to welfare. Participants leaving Work First because of employment are tracked to determine if they return to Cash Assistance.

If the family’s need is going to be met, or if it alleviates the family’s crisis situation then short-term services may be offered. Short term services may include Benefit

Diversion or services at or below 200% of the federal poverty level. The case manager can also provide problem solving, counseling, referrals to community resources, and case management. The case manager evaluates a family's situation and will develop a plan with the family to achieve self-sufficiency. Everyone has the right to apply for Work First Family Assistance.

5. Job Retention

Families who continue to be employed 6 to 12 months after leaving the Work First program show evidence of keeping their income and increased job stability which directly impacts a family's self-sufficiency and well-being. This is measured by a participant staying off of assistance after becoming employed.

6. Benefit Diversion

The most successful outcome possible for an applicant of public assistance is to avoid the need to become a recipient. This is also recognized in the federal law, which specifies diversion from public assistance as a desired outcome. Use of Work First Benefit Diversion Assistance for a specified percentage or number of Work First applicants is a performance measure for each county.

Caldwell County will offer Benefit Diversion when appropriate along with other supportive services. Benefit Diversion will be assessed if appropriate prior to placement on public assistance. Caldwell County looks at taking a Work First application last after other options (such as Benefit Diversion) have been explored and evaluated. Everyone has the right to apply for Work First.

## IV. PLANS TO ACHIEVE THE OUTCOMES AND GOALS

### A. Activities

In order to meet the Federal mandated goals listed above the following activities may be utilized:

1. Employment

| ACTIVITY | PROVIDER | LOCATION |
|---|---|---|
| Job Searching, Job Coaching | DSS and Division of Workforce Solutions (DWS) NC Works / Career Planning and Placement Center / Community College | DSS and DWS<br><br>NC Works / Career Planning and Placement Center / Community College/ Online |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Job development and placement | DWS | DWS/Online |
| Budget Class (financial counseling) | NC Works / Career Planning and Placement Center / Community College | NC Works / Career Planning and Placement Center / Community College/ Online |
| Work Experience/ Community Service | DSS | Various work sites |
| Employment Assessment | DSS | DSS/Online |
| Education | Community College | Community College/ Online |
| Vocational Rehabilitation | Vocational Rehabilitation | Local office/ Online |
| WIOA programs | WIOA | Community College/ Online |
| Job skills training (job readiness, soft skills, etc.) | NC Works / Career Planning and Placement Center / Community College | NC Works / Career Planning and Placement Center / Community College/ Online |

The Case Manager will explain and discuss in detail the Work First program on the date of application and reiterate program requirements during subsequent appointments. The primary focus will be on personal responsibility and employment. The case manager will provide Work First participants with a full array of services, including developing an appropriate Mutual Responsibility Agreement (MRA), and will closely monitor progress with each participant.

All mandatory participants will be placed in appropriate countable activities such as employment, job searching, job readiness, work experience, placement with Vocational Rehabilitation, etc.

Caldwell County's Work First case managers have built relationships with community business partners that have allowed us to utilize them for work experience placement sites in lieu of placing participants in community service. Our goal is to provide participants with the opportunity to learn good work habits and obtain training and knowledge needed to become gainfully employed. Many work experience placements lead to employment for the participant, either at the work experience site itself or with another employer. Caldwell County will continue looking at a work experience placement for a recipient as a first priority with the knowledge that community service is always a viable option when needed.

**Community Service**

Caldwell County chooses not to offer Community Service to participants receiving assistance.

Case manager will assure that participation hours are recorded into NC FAST each month. The supervisor will monitor participation hours and reports and follow up with the case manager if needed. Case manager will make appropriate referrals to community partners.

## B. Supportive Services

The following supportive services will be offered in conjunction with activities to enable individuals to participate. These may include but are not limited to:

| SERVICE | PROVIDER | LOCATION |
|---|---|---|
| Family Violence Services | Shelter Home of Caldwell County | Shelter Home of Caldwell County |
| Child Care Subsidy | DSS | DSS |
| Emergency Assistance | DSS / Various Vendors | DSS / Various Vendors |
| Transportation | Various Vendors | Caldwell County |
| Mileage / Gas Reimbursement | DSS | Various Vendors |
| Food and Nutrition | DSS | DSS |
| Resume, Job Searching, Job Readiness, etc. | NC Works / Career Planning and Placement Center / Community College | NC Works / Career Planning and Placement Center / Community College |
| Budget Class (financial counseling) | NC Works / Career Planning and Placement Center / Community College | NC Works / Career Planning and Placement Center / Community College |
| Substance Abuse Counseling | LME | LME |

When working with families, the case manager uses the Principles of Partnership approach and the Work First Assessment of Strengths and Needs. The Case Manager will evaluate the whole family to assess appropriate resources that will

address the family's needs as well as focus on their strengths to guide them more toward gainful employment and self-sufficiency.

## V. ADMINISTRATION

### A. Authority

The Caldwell County Board of Commissioners has delegated authority to the Caldwell County Department of Social Services to administer the Work First Program and operationalize the Electing County Plan. The Board of Commissioners understands its legal responsibility to ensure the plan is successfully executed.

### B. Organization

Caldwell County Department of Social Services is responsible for administration of the Work First program. The Work First supervisor and 1 Work First case manager carries out the mandates of the program. The Work First case manager is classified as Community Employment Case Manager and devotes 100% of her time administering the Work First program. Our Mental Health LME/MCO is care case manager, and is co-located in our DSS office which can be utilized when needed. Our mental health provider (RHA) can carry out assessments in our office and is also has a facility located on our campus. Due to the ongoing COVID pandemic, whenever possible, virtual platforms may be used to assist families in all facets of their interactions with social services.

The Work First program is supervised by an Income Maintenance Supervisor II who reports to the Income Maintenance Administrator who in turn reports to the Agency Director.

#### 1. Eligibility Determination

The Work First case manager determines eligibility for Work First Cash Assistance and administers the employment component of the program. The case manager will take and process applications, recertifications, and changes to maintain the case and keep it current. Caseloads may consist of child only, employment, benefit diversion, incapacitated and/or needed in the home, "S" exemption cases, and services at or below 200% of Federal Poverty Level.

#### 2. Emergency Assistance

Emergency Assistance eligibility is determined by Emergency Assistance caseworkers which is classified as Income Maintenance Caseworkers. Currently, emergency assistance caseworkers report to

a different Income Maintenance Supervisor. There is consistent communication and collaboration between both Income Maintenance Supervisors and all involved caseworkers. This allows for our emergency assistance staff to be experts in this area when it comes to resources and be able to offer the most up-to-date information in our county when assisting with these needs.

3. **Employment Services**

The Work First case manager determines eligibility for Work First Cash Assistance and administers the employment component of the program. The case manager will take and process applications, recertifications, and changes to maintain the case. The case manager will evaluate the whole family to assess appropriate resources that will address the family's needs as well as focus on their strengths to guide them more toward gainful employment and self-sufficiency. Referrals can be made for participants to help eliminate barriers to employment. All mandatory participants will be placed in appropriate countable activities such as employment, job searching, job readiness, work experience, placement with Vocational Rehabilitation etc.

Caldwell County's Work First case manager has established and maintained relationships with community business partners that allows us to utilize them as work experience placement sites in lieu of placing participants in community service. Our goal is to provide participants with the opportunity to learn good work habits while obtaining training and knowledge needed to become gainfully employed. Many work experience placements lead to employment for the participant, either at the work experience site itself or with another employer. Caldwell County will continue looking at a work experience placement for a recipient as a first priority with the knowledge that community service is always a viable option when needed.

4. **Formal Assessments (employment and functional)**

Work First case managers complete the Strengths and Needs Assessment with applicants the day of application. Applicants participating in the employment program are referred to NC Works/ Career Planning and Placement Center to enroll in their program and to complete the employment assessments. Individuals that are unable to participate in work activities are referred to Vocational Rehabilitation for further assessment and possible recommendations. Functional Capacity Evaluations are also available to use when deemed necessary.

5. **Intake**

At intake, the case manager completes an assessment to determine what referrals or supportive services could be utilized from our community partners. Community referrals and programs within the agency are explored for every case. Taking a Work First application and having someone go on the welfare rolls are evaluated last; however, everyone has the right to apply for Work First. Applications may be received in person at the agency, or via mail, fax, and/or email. Applications can be printed offline at http:/www.epass.nc.gov where other economic service applications are found as well. A client may call and request an application to be mailed, faxed, or emailed to them. If an application is mailed or picked up in person from our agency, a prepaid postage return envelope is also included with the application.

### 6. Other Supportive Services

While conducting the intake interview and assessing the family's strengths and needs, Case Managers are able to identify supportive services to help participants to become gainfully employed and self-sufficient. Appropriate referrals are made for these supportive services to help eliminate barriers to locating and maintaining employment. Any needs or obstacles that could be alleviated through using emergency assistance funding on a very broad scale would be used to help families potentially stay off of welfare.

Case coordination is maintained with Child Welfare staff through joint staffing, being mandatory collaterals, feedback from home visits, coordinating activities on the Mutual Responsibility Agreement (MRA) and Child Welfare case plan and inclusion of the Work First Case Manager on "Child and Family Team Meetings" for families as appropriate.

## C. Child Care

Child Care will be subsidized for families in the following order:

1. Homelessness (per CCDF/SCCA definitions)
2. Child Protective Services
3. Employed Parents who are:
   a. Foster Parents
   b. Work First Participants
   c. Working Full-Time
   d. Working Part-Time
4. Child Welfare Services
5. Children with Developmental Needs
6. WFFA Child Only Cases
7. Other Parents in Education and/or Training Leading to Employment

Children in protective services with a supporting referral from a social worker and actively working with the family, foster care, parents that are Work First participants, or teen parents attending high school will not be placed on the waiting list. These families will be given priority for child care assistance.

## D. Transportation

Caldwell County is committed to ensure that transportation will not be a barrier. A variety of methods will be utilized to accommodate differing needs including transportation by taxis, public transportation, and individual drivers for job search and employment. In addition, participants driving their personal vehicle, borrowing a vehicle to drive or having someone else assisting with their transportation needs will be provided gas vouchers in some situations.

As in other Work First activities, there must be a mutual commitment by both the agency and participant to make Work First a successful experience for the participant. In the case of transportation, with the agency's commitment to providing it, the participant must utilize it properly to ensure cost effectiveness. While on Work First transportation assistance will be provided as long as it is needed.

In addition, a person at or below 200% of Federal Poverty Level may apply for TANF services and receive transportation assistance assuming eligibility criteria is met and the person is employed. If employed, this group of recipients may receive other transportation-related aids including car repairs and help with payment of auto insurance.

## E. Substance Use/Mental Health

As deemed necessary, Work First applicants and/or recipients are referred to a local mental health program (presently Vaya - RHA). These services can be provided in our DSS office or at RHA, which is located on our campus. The Audit/Dast 10 (DSS-8218) and Behavioral Indicators (DSS-5325 - Substance Abuse Behavioral Indicator Checklist II) are used in this process. Applicants/recipients are offered the opportunity to volunteer to be screened for mental health issues also using the Emotional Health Inventory.

If this screening indicates the possibility of substance abuse, the applicant/recipient will be referred to a QPSA (Qualified Professional in Substance Abuse) for further assessment. The case manager will coordinate with the QPSA to schedule appropriate appointments. The applicant/recipient will complete and sign the necessary consent form (DSS-8219) to allow the QPSA to provide the results of the participant's assessment and progress with the treatment plan, if applicable. The QPSA will be provided a copy of the consent

form and/or the Audit/Dast 10, or the Substance Abuse Behavioral Indicator Checklist.

Recommendations from this assessment will be forwarded to the Work First case manager so this data can be part of the participant's Mutual Responsibility Agreement (MRA). All non-compliance by applicants/recipients will be reported in writing by the QPSA to the case manager the next work day following their non-compliance. Case managers will notify the QPSA in writing within 10 calendar days of any change that may affect the case. All changes and notifications may be done by telephone call with written documentation for the case record.

## F. Family Violence Option

Caldwell County Department of Social Services (DSS) and the Shelter Home of Caldwell County have a cooperative relationship. Caldwell County Child Welfare Program Administrator, Kim Arnett, sits on the Shelter Home Board. The Director of the Shelter Home sits on the Child Protection Fatality Team. This involvement keeps the lines of communication open and promotes understanding of both programs. The Shelter Home has also provided in-service training for DSS staff. The Shelter Home has also served as a work experience site for Work First participants and helps participants with professional clothing for job searching as needed and when available. The Shelter Home is also a great resource as they can provide transportation to other resources such as the career center, job opportunities, and other community activities that support Work First families.

At application and at each review the Work First case manager will screen the applicant/participant for domestic violence issues. If this screening indicates the possibility of domestic violence, the case manager will send a referral to the Shelter Home within five (5) working days for a more in-depth assessment and evaluation of the situation to determine the extent of domestic violence.

With the applicant/participant's permission, the worker will make a telephone call referral to the Shelter Home for an immediate appointment. The DSS-6969 (Consent for Release of Information) and DSS-6965 (Family Violence Option/Domestic Violence Work First Assessment) forms will be mailed or faxed to the Shelter Home with the top portion of the DSS-6965 completed by the case manager. Shelter Home staff will be asked to sign the agency's confidentiality agreement in conjunction with any confidentiality agreements their agency may require also. Under no circumstances will information about a case or situation be discussed with anyone other than those who are directly involved with and assisting the applicant/participant

.

Once the client is interviewed by Shelter Home staff the assessment report will be returned to the Work First case manager within five (5) calendar days of the interview. Based on this assessment report the case manager will determine whether or not a waiver is needed if the applicant/participant is unable to

participate in work activities or comply with other Work First requirements. This determination must be made within ten (10) working days from receipt of the assessment report. A Mutual Responsibility Agreement (MRA) can then be negotiated.

It should be noted that neither screenings, assessments, nor acceptance of a waiver are mandatory. There is no penalty if the client wishes not to cooperate, except, of course, a waiver cannot be granted.

For Work First Cash Assistance, a joint staffing with Work First staff, Shelter Home staff and Children's Services staff (if appropriate) will be held when someone wants to claim good cause for not cooperating with child support, and a decision to grant good cause cannot be agreed upon.

Victims of domestic violence may be eligible for monetary assistance even though TANF-DV funding has been eliminated. These individuals may be eligible for Work First Emergency Assistance funds accessed through the Emergency Assistance unit.

These funds can be used to provide the following:

1. Deposits for rent, telephone, electric, etc.
2. Payment of rent and utility expenses, etc.
3. Furnishings for a residence.
4. Other expenses as needed to promote family safety and self-sufficiency.

The criteria for eligibility of this funding:

1. Same eligibility criteria used for Emergency Assistance since these will be the funds used in these instances.

Our agency also has a Child Welfare fund that is able to assist families in crisis for many different needs. We will assist these families to alleviate any potential obstacles that would keep them safe and off of welfare if possible.

## G. Other Services

Referrals are made to NC Vocational Rehabilitation when appropriate and necessary. Documentation can be found in the case narrative and also on the Mutual Responsibility Agreement (MRA). Follow up telephone calls as well as case staffing on mutual clients are utilized when working with families to help overcome any barriers to employment.

Coordination of services and resources occurs between the Work First case manager and NC Works Career Center staff. Case managers refer individuals to NCWorks at application to complete and/or update their registration through NCWorks. Individuals are referred to NCWorks to complete and/or update a

resume to use when job searching. Career Center staff share with Case managers a schedule of employment readiness classes offered at the center. Case Manager may refer applicants, when appropriate, to these classes. Work First Case Managers refer applicants to NCWorks when an individual has a criminal background. Career Center staff with expertise in this area are able to assist individuals with how to fill out applications appropriately, how to address criminal history during an interview, how to take ownership of their actions and how to sell themselves to potential employers. Career Center staff also refer individuals to apply for Work First Family Assistance as needed.

## H. Maintenance of Effort (MOE)

The County will budget funds sufficient to meet the 90% Maintenance of Effort (MOE) requirement. Caldwell County typically meets their MOE 9 to 10 months into the fiscal year. It is anticipated that MOE funds will be used for:

Work First
Child Protective Services Intake
Emergency Assistance Intake
Emergency Assistance Cash
Work First Child Care Administration costs
Work First Transportation and Participation

## I. Child Welfare Services

Many Work First cases ultimately present themselves as child welfare cases. Therefore, a major emphasis of agency planning is to support organizational changes and practices that support a broader conceptualization of child welfare. Having common practices, principles (all staff trained in Family Centered Practice), generic processes (front end assessment in Work First and Child Welfare Services; Child and Family Team Meetings) and a common philosophy across programs' accountability is enhanced both for client/family outcomes and the agency's effort to support families in goal achievement.

The multiple response approach embraces family support and family-centered service principles, which is a "fit" for the agency's overall philosophy. One of the seven strategies of multiple response include closer coordination and collaboration with the Work First program. The connection between the self-sufficiency of families and the safety, permanence, and well-being of children is obvious. Parents who have jobs are in a better position to care for their children. Our Work First and Child Welfare staff collaborate on developing a case plan and Mutual Responsibility Agreement (MRA) with families to ensure we are being reasonable in our expectations.

This philosophy under-girds the Electing County process as well – our goal is to help families become more self-sufficient in all phases of their lives; thus, promoting prosperity, permanence and safety for themselves and their children.

## VI. EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE

Emergency Assistance will be utilized to assist families through unexpected and work-related crisis situations. Emergency situations are evaluated to determine what led to the emergency. This could include, for example, loss of employment, missed hours at work because of illness or hospitalization or events beyond the client's control. Emergency Assistance will only get the family through the crisis. With the assistance of the emergency assistance caseworker the family can develop a plan to avoid future crises. Emergency Assistance will be for short-term assistance only and will meet this guideline in that it is:

- Non-recurring, short-term benefits designed to deal with a specific episode of need;
- Not intended to meet recurring or ongoing needs;
- Not extending beyond four (4) months; and
- Meets agency criteria of a true emergency.

Emergency Assistance will be provided using the following:

1. As funds permit, all cases will be assisted at the minimum amount needed to alleviate the crisis situation. Any amount needed in excess of $200.00 must be approved by the Supervisor, Program Administrator or Director. Maximum assistance per household per 12-month period can be up to $600.00.
2. As funds permit, the family will be assisted with Work First Emergency Assistance funds once in a 12-month period.
3. The family must have a child who lives with a relative as defined by Work First Family Assistance policy, or has legal custody or legal guardianship, and who meets the age limit for Work First Family Assistance.
4. Total gross monthly income must be at or below 200% of federal poverty level. The base period for computing gross wages is the month prior to the application for Emergency Assistance, unless a change has occurred in hours, employment, or pay.
5. The types of countable income are the same as for Work First Family Assistance.
6. Client statement can be used to prove citizenship unless questionable. If in doubt appropriate documentation will be requested.
7. Client statement can be used to prove kinship and household composition unless questionable.
8. Reserve limits will be the same as Work First Family Assistance.
9. During application, a family budget will be completed by the caseworker. The family budget must show that the family can maintain ongoing bills once Emergency Assistance is given. If this is not the case, Emergency Assistance may not be appropriate.

10. All applicants will be referred to attend a budget class training every time assistance is approved. Failure to successfully complete the two (2) hour training without good cause will affect future eligibility for Emergency Assistance funds.
11. All applicants for Work First Emergency Assistance having a child with one or both parents absent from the home will be referred to Child Support Enforcement unless there is good cause. After one time being assisted within a calendar year with Emergency Assistance funds, further financial assistance cannot be given until the applicant has fully cooperated with Child Support unless there is good cause. This is looked at on a case-by-case basis.
12. Services to be provided through Emergency Assistance are as follows, when there are emergency needs:

    A. Past due rent (must have an eviction notice)
    B. Utility expenses (must have disconnect notice)
    C. Deposits for rent and utilities
    D. Emergency housing for victims of family violence
    E. Temporary housing for displaced families in a crisis situation
    F. Housing assistance with deposit application fees
    G. Assistance with needed baby items such as diapers, formula, wipes, etc.
    H. Fees for client to access birth certificate or application of NCDL, NCID, etc.
    I. Any other requests with approval of Supervisor, Income Maintenance Administrator and/or Director.

## VII. SERVICES TO LOW INCOME FAMILIES (under 200% of Federal Poverty Level)

In order to prevent dependency and avoid the need for families to become cash assistance recipients, Caldwell County will, as funds permit, provide certain services to families at or below 200% of Federal Poverty Level (FPL) as follows:

1. WFFA-EA eligibility criteria will apply
2. Services ***may*** include:
    a. Cash Assistance
    b. Transportation
    c. Work related expenses, and
    d. Referral to other partner resources.
3. All recipients of services for families with income at or below 200% FPL must enter into a Mutual Responsibility Agreement (MRA) delineating steps they will take to ensure how future emergencies of the same kind will be avoided.

4. Compliance with the conditions stated on the MRA must be met before further services for families with income at or below 200% FPL can be received. Non-compliance without good cause can only be reversed by complying with the conditions stated in the MRA or by Supervisor approval.
5. As funds permit, the maximum assistance per household will be $1,000 per 12-month period.

Mandatory Work First recipients will receive priority in receiving assistance followed by Work First Emergency Assistance recipients and then families with income at or below 200% FPL.

## VIII. SERVICES TO NON-CUSTODIAL PARENTS

Caldwell County will not provide employment services to non-custodial parents of Work First children at this time. The Case Manager will provide information, and resources that may be helpful for non-custodial parents per their request. Resources and information that may be provided but not limited to is upcoming job/recruitment fairs, NC Works information, resume building, and interview preparedness workshops.

## IX. EXEMPTION FROM THE WORK REQUIREMENT

Single parents may claim their "S" exemption for the first three (3) months of a child's life. Once the 12-month lifetime exemption has been exhausted the parent will be required to participate in the employment program as soon as they are released from their doctor. If a parent volunteers to participate in the employment program he/she may not reclaim the exemption for the same child.

## X. INNOVATIVE COUNTY STRATEGIES

1. BUDGET CLASS

   A. All Work First applicants (parents and caretakers unless otherwise specified) are required to complete the two (2) hour budget class within ten (10) calendar days of applying for Work First unless there is good cause. Attendance will not be required if the applicant has successfully completed the class with a minimum attendance time of 2 hours within 30 calendar days prior to the Work First application date. Failure to complete the two (2) hour class will result in the Work First application being denied on the 11$^{th}$ day unless there is good cause. (NOTE: Non-parent caretakers may be exempt from the budget class per case manager discretion.)
   B. Emergency Assistance caseworkers using Work First Emergency Assistance and United Way funds are required to make referrals to the budget class also unless there is good cause. Future eligibility of

Emergency Assistance and United Way funds is contingent upon completion of the two (2) hour class unless there is good cause.

C. This class is available for anyone receiving assistance or involved in services provided by the Department of Social Services.

2. WORK FIRST / CPS CASE STAFFINGS

A. Work First cases that have child welfare involvement are jointly staffed between the Work First case manager and the child welfare social worker.
B. Work First case managers and child welfare social workers may coordinate the development of the case plan and Mutual Responsibility Agreement (MRA) to better assist the family and avoid overlapping services.
C. Child Welfare staff are mandatory collaterals for Work First cases and Work First staff are mandatory collaterals for Child Welfare cases.
D. Work First case managers will participate in child and family team meetings, if applicable.

3. SCHOOL PROTOCOL

A. Each month a listing of all school-age Work First children is provided to all school social workers.
B. If tardiness, absences, or any other concerns exist that impact a child's learning potential the school social worker then contacts the Work First case manager. The case manager and school social worker may schedule a child and family team meeting with the parent/caretaker to address concerns and discuss ways to resolve any issues. This may include referrals for supportive services such as counseling, tutoring, etc. This will be determined on a case-by-case basis and on the family's needs.
C. Steps will be listed on the Mutual Responsibility Agreement (MRA) to help resolve any issues.
D. School social workers will be asked to sign the agency's confidentiality agreement in conjunction with any confidentiality agreements their organization may require as well. Under no circumstances will information about the family/child be discussed with anyone other than those who are directly involved with and assisting the family.

4. FURTHER OUTREACH WITH FUNDS

A. During the process of interviewing clients for services we will be looking into the needs of the family, parent, or child that could benefit the family as a whole to avoid further assistance. Many families are shortly away from a crisis, and a small amount of funds somewhat like benefit diversion can help the family alleviate crisis and prevent the family from further services.
B. Technology has become a primary component of day-to-day life for everyone. Without the use of a phone or computer parents/caretakers cannot job

search, set up interviews, or complete job applications. The need has also been to have computer access with internet for children to complete school work or complete school remotely. Funds will be opened up to help with access to deposits, paying bills, or avoiding disconnection notices to assist the family from losing these components.

C. At times there are certain events (graduations, school performances, work trainings, interviews, mental health appointments, group or individual therapy) that are scheduled outside the typical hours that child care facilities are open. To better assist our clients during those times, as funding permits a portion of the child care sitter's fee could be paid to the responsible adult for the child. In return, the responsible adult would be responsible for selecting and paying the sitter of their choice during the time of need. Caldwell County Department of Social Services will not select, recommend, or be responsible for the child care sitter selected, nor will the agency be responsible to ensure payment for services is received. Providing payment for sitters will be up to the discretion of the case manager and supervisor.
D. With our Work First Family Assistance cases there are times when many grandparents or kinship placements are taking care of their grandchildren or siblings. These placements may not have been prepared for the influx of income that may be needed to help with providing with school activities or things that would be needed for a child on a day-to-day basis. This also could be the case for a Work First family raising their biological children but not able to afford the needs for a child to attend school while avoiding a crisis. With the Work First Emergency Assistance funding a case manager can help to evaluate the needs of the family to see how our funding can assist to alleviate undo hardship. Some examples of these items could be but are not limited to: cap and gown expenses, school pictures, field trip expenses, school clothes, school supplies, college application fees, and ACT/SAT fees.

The strategy for use of these funds is to help promote the family with assistance in their current crisis so that the family can potentially avoid further welfare assistance. Work First Family Assistance is for assisting the family to self-sufficiency along with assisting with child needs. With these funds the Energy Assistance component for Work First families can be used somewhat like benefit diversion to tailor to the specific need, avoid future crisis, and promote self-sufficiency.

## XI. SPECIAL ISSUES

Thankfully, Caldwell County's unemployment rate continues to improve. New employers are moving into the county, and current employers are growing and expanding. However, several of these new opportunities are in the service industry which could involve night and weekend work as well as rotating schedules. This type of work makes child care and transportation for participants challenging to arrange and schedule.

Many companies are requiring their employees to have at least a high school diploma or equivalent. This becomes an issue with Work First participants when education is not always a viable program activity option when meeting participation rates. We agree that employment leading towards self-sufficiency is extremely important; however, an educational base is just as important for participants to be successful as good employees, community members, and parents.

The demand for child care assistance will always be prevalent, especially with the cost of child care services. Multiple changes with the Subsidized Child Care Assistance program over the past few years has put additional strain and stress on families who are already trying to make ends meet. Challenges have included child care facilities closing, not having enough staff to meet staff-to-child ratios, and not having enough child care facilities. Some families have had to make tough decisions such as allowing a younger school-age child to ride the bus home from school versus attending an after-school program.

**Policies and Procedures regarding Compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act and Interpreter Services:**

Caldwell County complies with laws set forth by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) as well as the provision of interpreter services for individuals that require such accommodations. Our agency is handicap accessible with handicap parking identified at the front of the building as close as possible to the front door. The agency is equipped with automatic doors to enter the building and lobby areas. Our 3-story building includes an elevator for individuals to access each floor of the agency. All offices are large enough to accommodate wheelchairs. We utilize the Relay telephone service if needed. We have a social worker on site for the blind and vision impaired. We also have contracts with individuals to provide ASL.

The agency ensures that effective bilingual/interpretive services are provided to serve the needs of the non-English speaking population. The provision of bilingual/interpretive services is prompt without undue delays. In most circumstances, this requires language services to be available during all operating hours.

This requirement is met by:

- Designation of one staff position to be an interpreter/translator full time for all agency staff members to utilize as needed
- One (1) bilingual Food and Nutrition Income Maintenance Caseworker and one (1) bilingual Family and Children's Medicaid Income Maintenance Caseworker who also serve as back-up to the full-time designated agency Interpreter
- One (1) bilingual child welfare social worker assists with translating for Child Protective Services as well as serving as back up to the full-time designated agency interpreter.
- Utilizing telephone interpreter services when necessary

This agency provides language assistance at all levels of interaction with limited English Proficiency individuals including telephone interactions. The agency will use in-house interpreters as a first option. Secondly, the telephonic program can be utilized.

## XII. ELIGIBLITY CRITERIA

Electing Policy:

1. Applicant is responsible for all verifications needed to complete the application. Caldwell County will assist applicants with disabilities or limited English proficiency upon request.
2. Benefit Diversion may be offered only once every two (2) years. Once a case is approved as Benefit Diversion the family cannot receive diversion assistance again for 2 years after the end of the certification period.
3. An application will be denied if the applicant does not comply with a signed Mutual Responsibility Agreement (MRA) unless there is good cause.
4. All applicants must meet and cooperate with child support within 10 calendar days of applying for Work First. Failure to do so will result in the application being denied on the 11th day unless there is good cause. Recipients must continue to cooperate with child support ongoing or the Work First case will terminate unless there is good cause.
5. All applicants, parents, and caretakers unless otherwise specified, must complete the economic budget class with a minimum attendance time of 2 hours within 10 calendar days of applying for Work First. Failure to do so will result in the application being denied on the 11th day unless there is good cause. Attendance will not be required if the applicant has successfully completed the class with a minimum attendance time of 2 hours within 30 calendar days prior to the application date. Non-parent caretakers may be exempt from the budget class per case manager discretion.
6. If both quarterly reporting deadlines are missed without good cause there will be one (1) month of ineligibility.
7. Participants' statement of kinship will be acceptable at review unless questionable.
8. Cases will not be re-opened unless it is an agency error. The applicant/recipient may reapply for Work First.
9. All income, with the exception of SSI income, will be counted for parents living in the home to determine Work First eligibility.
10. Recipients who are no longer eligible for Work First and are placed on Transitional Medicaid are required to continue cooperating with child support as long as the Transitional Medicaid case remains active. Failure to do so will result in Medicaid benefits terminating for the adult caretaker(s) unless good cause exists. Ongoing Medicaid will be evaluated for the child(ren) in the household.
11. School attendance – The caretaker must provide proof of school attendance for all school-age children at application and review by providing a current report card, attendance summary printout from the school or enrollment verification if a

new student in the Caldwell County school system. Work First case managers verify school attendance with school social workers on a monthly basis. Therefore, it is not necessary for the case managers to call the schools when a quarterly report is received. Failure to provide proof of school attendance or verification of enrollment at review results in an incomplete review unless there is good cause. Failure to provide proof of school attendance or verification of enrollment at application results in the application being denied unless there is good cause.

12. All children in K – 8th grades cannot have more than ten (10) unexcused absences in a school grading period unless there is good cause. All children in 9th – 12th grades cannot have more than 10 unexcused cumulative class absences in a grading period unless there is good cause. More than ten (10) unexcused absences will result in a sanction of one (1) month of ineligibility or until compliance whichever is greater.
13. Cases where all children in the household are receiving SSI benefits will not be eligible for Work First as there is no eligible child in the home.
14. Single parents may claim their “S” exemption for the first three (3) months of a child’s life. Once the 12-month lifetime exemption has been exhausted the parent will be required to participate in the employment program as soon as authorization is given from their doctor. Also, if a parent volunteers to participate in the employment program he/she may not reclaim the exemption for the same child.
15. All parents in the home must have their GED or high school diploma or be enrolled in a satisfactory attending education enhancement class (i.e., GED, adult high school, English as a Second Language, literacy, etc.) unless there is good cause. Verification of attendance and satisfactory progress will be provided monthly by the parent(s) or the Work First case will terminate unless there is good cause. Work First case managers will use the same GED attendance and progress verification form used for employment cases on all cases where the parent is in the home to measure this requirement. Parents will meet with the case manager monthly and enter into a Mutual Responsibility Agreement (MRA). Parents will be required to complete a minimum of 15 class hours per week unless there is good cause. Success of children depends on them having a good role model representing the importance of education.
16. All Work First cases will be reviewed every twelve (12) months.
17. All mandatory able-bodied Work First participants will be required to complete at least 35 hours per week of work or work-related activities to meet participation hours unless there is good cause.
18. All applicants whose Work First case terminated for not completing a review will be required to provide all verifications needed for the review (school attendance, health checkups, immunizations, etc.) when re-applying for Work First Cash Assistance within three (3) months of the termination date. The 3-month time period includes the one (1) month of ineligibility.

Caldwell County will continue to use the Mutual Responsibility Agreement forms DSS-6963A and DSS-6963B.

## XIII. APPEALS PROCESS

Standard policy will be followed for county level hearings. In Caldwell County, Economic Services Income Maintenance supervisors, not directly connected with the case, will hear the appeal. The Income Maintenance Administrator compiles a list of supervisors that will serve as the local hearing officer, and this is rotated on a monthly basis.

Caldwell County will utilize a three-person panel appointed by the Caldwell County Board of Commissioners to hear all second level appeals. This panel will include a DSS Board member, decided by the Caldwell County DSS Board; a County Commissioner, decided by the Caldwell County Board of Commissioners; and a citizen-at-large, appointed by the Caldwell County Board of Commissioners. The Work First program supervisor, in conjunction with the DSS Director, will ensure no conflict of interest exists with anyone appointed to this panel. Each individual will be required to sign an agency confidentiality agreement to ensure details discussed are not shared with anyone outside the hearing setting.

Applicants/recipients are notified when they receive their denial/termination notice of their right to appeal and the process. Applicant/recipient appeals will be provided to dispute proper application of policy. In the event that the applicant/recipient does not agree with the decision rendered by the panel, they have the right to appeal the decision to the Superior Court pursuant to NCGS 1081-79.

The duties of the hearing officer and the second level appeal panel are to conduct the hearing, collect all evidence and testimony, and render a written decision to the client and the Department of Social Services within fifteen (15) calendar days. Notification of the hearing decision will be mailed “Certified Mail-Return Receipt Requested.” The notice will inform the client of the right to further appeal if applicable.

## XIV. REVIEW PRIOR TO EXPIRATION OF TIME LIMITS

Caldwell County will follow standard Work First program policy.

## XV. FUNDING REQUIREMENTS

Caldwell County anticipates the following spending for the items specified:

| | |
|---|---|
| (1) CPS | $1,500,000 |
| (2) Foster Care | $160,000 |
| (3) Work First EA | $30,000 |

| | |
|---|---|
| (4) Work First Trans and Participation (Services) | $5,000 |
| (5) MOE | $546,172 |
| (6) Cash Assistance (Benefit Diversion) | $160,000 |
| Total | $2,401,172 |

Caldwell County will maintain the required 90% Maintenance of Effort (MOE) as an Electing County. Any savings this may have generated has been reinvested in Child Welfare since 1999. The local strategy will be to reinvest any cash savings in other services to support the goals of TANF including Emergency Assistance, Transportation and various contracted services to families under 200% of Federal Poverty Level. The above numbers reflect this reinvestment.

## XVI. CERTIFICATION

Certification of the Work First Electing County Plan was approved unanimously by the Caldwell County Board of Commissioners on January 10, 2022.

Commissioners
Randy T. Church, Chairman
Mike LaBrose, Vice Chairman
Jeff Branch
Donnie Potter
Robbie Wilkie

Donald Duncan, County Manager

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January 10, 2022

Caldwell County Work First Program Electing County Block Grant Plan Approval Certification

For Federal Fiscal Years 2023-2026 WPV
25

The Board of Commissioners of Caldwell County voted on January 10, 2022 by at least two-thirds in favor of approval of Caldwell County's Work First electing plan.

Randy Church, Chairman