

# CATAWBA COUNTY WORK FIRST PLAN 2026 - 2028



Submitted: February 10, 2025  
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## I. Condition within the County

- Only 135 of Catawba County's 165,000 citizens receive Work First. That is less than 0.1% of the population. (2023 US Census Bureau)
- 70 families were receiving Work First in November 2024. Of these, 69 included no adult in the assistance payment (Monthly Staffing Report).
- 1 family is Work Eligible which means they must comply with the Employment component of the program (Monthly Staffing Report)
- The racial heritage of families receiving Work First is 69% Caucasian, 26% African-American, 0% Hispanic and 5% Asian (Work First Case Profile Summary).
- Work First recipients face many barriers to employment, some of these barriers are education, transportation, childcare or criminal background.
- 7 % of all households in Catawba County have no vehicle available for personal use. (2023 American Community Survey – US Census Bureau)
- Catawba County had an unemployment rate of 3.3% in October 2024 while the State's rate was 3.7%. (NCWorks)
- 99% of the job openings in Catawba County require a minimum education level of High School Diploma or equivalent.
- 12.5% of Catawba County's citizens over the age 25 do not have a High School Diploma or equivalent. (2023 American Community Survey – US Census Bureau)
- In North Carolina, a minimum wage earner (earning \$7.25 per hour) can afford a monthly rent of no more than \$374.00, while the Fair Market Rate for a one-bedroom unit is \$834.00. (HUDUser.gov)
- 21,929 children in Catawba County were enrolled in either Medicaid as of November 2024.
- FNS caseloads have increased by approximately 4% from November 2023 (11,790) to November 2024 (12,166).

Recent statistics reveal that as of Q2 2024, the top three employers in the county are Catawba Valley Medical Center, Corning Optical Communications and Catawba County Schools (Economic Development Corporation-Catawba County). Therefore, the majority of the available jobs are in the industries which involve night and weekend work, as well as rotating shifts. This type of scheduling makes childcare and transportation very difficult to coordinate.

Education and technical training continue to be high priorities for Catawba County. Catawba Valley Community College offers short term training and college transfer curriculum. Catawba County is also home to Lenoir Rhyne University, a four year liberal arts school. Catawba County possesses a diverse economy with extensive retail, service and manufacturing jobs.

Childcare options for rotating schedules have improved but options are still very limited as compared to those working a traditional work schedule (Monday – Friday 8am – 5pm). Three providers currently offer second shift care and three providers that offer third shift care. There are only two providers that offer weekend care. Helping families to locate safe and affordable childcare to meet the needs of irregular work schedules is imperative to continued success of the program. (The Children's Resource Center)

Public transportation is not available throughout the county. There is no public transportation available outside of the extended workday and buses do not run on Sundays. Many areas of the county are miles from the nearest employer and/or child care provider. For these families, the lack of transportation is a major barrier to self-sufficiency.

**Mission Statement**

To enable Work First recipients and applicants to become and remain self-sufficient by linking them with resources and skills, and to allow them to take responsibility for themselves and their families.

**Vision Statement**

All Catawba County families will demonstrate personal responsibility and will have the resources needed to meet their basic needs – food, clothing, shelter, and medical care.

## II. Planning Process

### A. Planning Committee

The State of North Carolina submits a State TANF Plan to the federal Department of Health and Human Services. The State Plan describes North Carolina's TANF Program, called Work First. The State Plan is an aggregate of the standard Work First Program and the various Electing County Plans.

The Social Services system in North Carolina is county-administered and state-supervised. The State Division of Social Services establishes the standard Work First Program according to guidelines contained in federal regulations and state law, allowing counties maximum local flexibility.

Electing counties develop a plan that describes their plans for administering the program in response to local needs and situations.

This plan will be for October 1, 2026 through September 30, 2028. The Board of County Commissioners approves county plans.

The planning process is an opportunity to take full advantage of local flexibility built into the Work First Program. It is the time to strengthen local partnerships and tap into local creativity to move low-income families into self-sufficiency.

On December 16, 2024, the Catawba County Board of County Commissioners voted for Catawba County to continue being an Electing County.

The Board of County Commissioners is required to appoint a committee to oversee the planning effort. The members of the Committee and the groups they represent are:

Robert Abernethy, Jr	Board of County Commissioners
Sherry Butler	Board of Social Services
Felicia Culbreath-Setzer	Division of Workforce Solutions) (NCWorks Career Centers)
Charity Patterson	Workforce Innovative Opportunity Act (WIOA)
Beth Mills	Vocational Rehabilitation Manager
Kim Holden	Partnership of Children
Paul Holden	Partners Behavioral Health Management
Jennifer McCracken	Public Health
Dr. Matt Stover	Local School System – Catawba County Schools
Dr. Jennifer Griffin	Local School System – Hickory Public Schools
Dr. Aron Gabriel	Local School System – Newton-Conover City Schools
Lindsay Keisler	Business Community
Molly Sain	Greater Hickory Cooperative Christian Ministry
Kristal Manning	Ashure Ministry
Enrique Perez	Salvation Army
Sharine Sample	Goodwill Manger

Ashley Benfield	Children's Resource Center
Jordan Harrison	Qualified Substance Abuse Professional (QSAP)
Julie Walker	Cognitive Connection Corporation
Michael Bowman	Greenway
Mark Bumgarner	Catawba County United Way
Lauren Daulton	WFFA/Daycare Supervisor
Beth Jones	Work First Program Manager
Rodney Franklin	DSS Assistant Director
Kari Whisnant	DSS Assistant Director

## **B. Public Comment**

The plan was made available for public review from January 10, 2025 through January 15, 2025. The plan was available for viewing at Catawba County Social Services and on the Social Services web page. Accepting the input from local citizens and with the recommendation of the Planning Committee, the plan was formally approved by the Catawba County Board of Commissioners.

## **C. Planning Development**

On January 8, 2025, the Planning Committee meeting was held. At this meeting, local Social Services staff gave the committee members an overview of the current Work First Program, demographic information on the current Work First population was shared with the group and a time line was developed for the project.

During the month of October and November, Work First participant and applicants were surveyed. The survey asked:

- What barriers are keeping you from becoming employed?
- What do you need in order to become employed?
- What services do you currently use from Social Services?
- What would you change about the Work First Program?
- What benefits/services of the Work First Program have helped you?
- If employed, what has helped you in keeping your job?
- What services do the children in the Work First grant need to help them be the best they can be?
- Any other comments

Catawba County's demonstrated record of commitment to children and families, collaborative strategic planning, risk taking and successful implementation of innovations makes this community a natural choice to continue being an Electing County. The successful track record includes efforts such as Catawba County TANF Housing Initiative, Work First Demonstration Grant, Work and Ride, Career Center, and Job Boost. Catawba County has used the many lessons learned from previous efforts to design this project for families in need.

Welfare reform continues to be a work in progress. The Board of County Commissioners and Social Services will continue to monitor and evaluate the impact of the Work First Program on children and families in Catawba County and to recommend adjustments and refinements to the collaborative effort as needed. Members of the committee have pledged their support of the proposal and its implementation.

Catawba County will follow the State Work First Non-Discrimination Policy and Grievance Procedures found in Section 002. The flyer DID YOU KNOW? (DSS 5333) is posted and given to customers as requested. Catawba County Social Services will inform all LEP (Limited English Proficiency) persons of the right to receive free interpreter services and encourage them to identify themselves as persons needing language assistance (Posted signs, statements in pamphlets, on the website, etc.) The language of the LEP person will be noted in his/her record so that all staff can identify the language assistance needs of the client. Bilingual staff and/or the Contract Telephone Interpreting Service will be used for effective communication between the Agency Staff and the LEP persons.

### III. Goals and Performance Measures

The Goal of the Catawba County Work First Program is to move Work First applicants and recipients to self-sufficiency by either empowering them to secure and maintain employment or by securing disability benefits.

#### A. Statewide Work First Goals

Catawba County will **adopt the goals established by the state**. Those goals are currently:

1. Meeting Federal Work Participation Rates for All Families. Active participants 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 activities.
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.

#### B. County Performance Measures

1. Employment: Self-sufficiency will be realized primarily through the employment of Work First citizens. Catawba County will work with participants to become employed.
2. Meeting Federal Participation Rates: Active participation in federal countable work activities will lead to full time employment.
3. Providing Employment Services: Active participation in intensive employment services for all families is necessary in order to meet the participation rate and to ensure families are served adequately before the end of five years. One measure of success in Work First is the percentage of families who are subject to work requirements that counties are assisting with job preparation and job placement. Catawba County will provide 100% of the Able Bodied adults with employment services.
4. Staying Off Welfare: Efforts to reduce welfare rolls, help adults find jobs, and increase self-sufficiency are undermined when families return to welfare. Families leaving Work First because of a job are tracked to determine if they return to cash assistance. Case Manager will provide case management, counseling and problem solving. Case Manager will evaluate former Work First participants for 200% of poverty services. Referrals to appropriate community resources will be made. (i.e. NCWorks, Salvation Army, Goodwill, Greater Hickory Cooperative Christian Ministries, Eastern Catawba Cooperative Christian Ministries, Family Care Center, etc.)
5. Job Retention: Families who leave Work First for employment and continue to be employed 6 to 12 months after leaving the program show evidence of



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- keeping their income and increased job stability, which impacts a family's well-being. Families that remain employed for four months will receive the County's retention bonus. The State does not track and/or provide this data to the counties; therefore, it will be a manual tracking of how many recipients receive the county's retention bonus.
6. Benefit Diversion: The most successful outcome for an applicant for 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. Catawba County will offer Benefit Diversion when appropriate and other supportive services. Benefit Diversion will be assessed if appropriate prior to placement on public assistance.

#### IV. Plans to Achieve the Outcomes and Goals

##### A. Activities

1. Employment: Work is the focus of the Work First Program. On the day of application, the case manager begins laying the foundation and ground rules for this program in Catawba County. The citizen is informed that Work First Cash Assistance is considered a short-term assistance and full time employment is the goal of the program.
  - a. Activities: Job Development and Placement provided by the NC Works, CVCC's Human Resources Development, English as a Second Language, GED (Graduate Equivalency Degree), Adult Basic Education, Short term skills training, CRC (Career Readiness Certificate) and Community Work Experience opportunities. Work First will continue to collaborate and partner with Catawba Valley Community College, NC Work, WIOA, Vocational Rehabilitation, Goodwill and Local Staffing Agencies.
  - b. Supportive Services: Counseling, case management, daycare, transportation, and participation expenses (mileage reimbursement, uniforms, tuition and books, etc.) child support and food assistance.
2. Meeting Federal Participation Rate: The rate will be met through a combination of efforts.
  - a. Activities: Employment services are offered to all able-bodied adults. Catawba County case managers will provide Work First participants with the full array of services, including developing appropriate Mutual Responsibility Agreements and closely monitoring progress as the citizen moves towards self-sufficiency. Case Managers will place all mandatory participants in appropriate countable Work First activities such as Employment, Vocational Education Training, Work Experience, Job Search/Job Readiness, etc. Job Ready participants will be referred to all Staffing Agencies in the area and to NC Works. All cases will be staffed with the supervisor at a minimum of once per month. Case managers will also make referrals to community resources. The case managers will assure that all applicable cases are opened in NC FAST and supervisor will monitor the employment services case management report and follow up if needed. Work First benefits will not be released if the participant is out of compliance with their Mutual Responsibility Agreement unless there is good cause and all cases out of compliance will be staffed by the unit to determine if good cause exists. Work First will continue to collaborate and partner with Greater Hickory Cooperative Christian Ministries, Eastern Catawba Cooperative Christian Ministries, Safe Harbor Rescue Mission, Salvation Army, Catawba Valley Community College, NC Work, WIOA, Vocational Rehabilitation, Goodwill and Local Staffing Agencies.

- b. Supportive Services: Counseling, case management, daycare, transportation, participation expenses (mileage reimbursement, uniforms, tuition and books, etc.) are provided to ensure that participants are able to complete the required number of hours in their assigned component(s).
3. Providing Employment Services: Citizens seeking employment will find a full array of services available to assist them.
  - a. Activities: Employment services are provided to all able-bodied adults. Case managers will assess the participant's job readiness and if appropriate place the participant in the NCWorks Employability Class before beginning the job search component. If appropriate, the participant will be required to obtain their CRC (Career Readiness Certificate). The case manager and participant will partner with NC Works, WIOA (Workforce Investment Opportunity Act), Vocational Rehabilitation, Employers and other appropriate programs to assist in the participant becoming employed.
  - b. Supportive Services: Counseling, case management, daycare, transportation, and participation expenses (mileage reimbursement, uniforms, tuition and books, etc.) child support and food assistance.
4. Staying off Welfare: Catawba County is using a multi-faceted approach to keep citizens on the job and off of welfare.
  - a. Activities: Case management services will be provided after the Work First participant becomes employed. Case managers will evaluate the former Work First participant for 200% of Poverty Services, Emergency Assistance, Retention service and bonus, and Economic Crisis Services in the county. Referrals to appropriate community resources will be made.
  - b. Supportive Services: Counseling, case management, daycare, transportation, Job Bonus, Transitional Medicaid, retention bonus, child support, food assistance, and community referrals.
5. Job Retention: Families who leave Work First for employment and continue to be employed six to twelve months after leaving the program show evidence of keeping their income and increases job stability, which impacts a family's well-being.
  - a. Activities: Case manager will provide case management, counseling and problem-solving. Case manager will refer former participants to appropriate agencies, such as Employment Security Commission, JobLink Career Center, and Employers. The case manager will evaluate former Work First recipients for 200% of Poverty Services, Emergency Assistance, and Retention Services.
  - b. Supportive Services: Counseling, case management, daycare, transportation, Job Bonus, Transitional Medicaid, retention bonus, child support, food assistance, and community referrals.
6. Benefit Diversion: The culture of Catawba County Social Services has changed. The focus is on employment, not processing entitlements. For many citizens in a short-term crisis, Benefit Diversion is an obvious solution.

- a. Activities: The case manager will assess each applicant's situation to determine if Benefit Diversion is appropriate and if so, will offer it to them. The case manager will consider previous public assistance and employment histories. The applicant's ability to find employment within a brief period of time, maintain current employment, or obtain sufficient income from other sources will also be considered.
- b. Supportive Services: Counseling, case management, Child support, and food assistance.

(Please see the section on Innovative County Strategies -- page 23)

## **V. Administration**

### **A. Authority**

The Catawba County Board of County Commissioners retains full authority for the Work First Program.

### **B. Organization**

Catawba County Social Services is responsible for administration of the Work First Program. From the moment the citizen makes first contact with the agency, he/she is informed that the Work First Program is a temporary assistance program and the goal for each citizen is full time employment and self-sufficiency. The case managers in this unit are blended doing both eligibility and employment functions. The Case Managers serve on Intake approximately twice a week. They take and process the applications and maintain the on-going cases which enables them to build a solid working relationship with the families that are being served.

### **C. Child Care**

When the availability of child care funding is less than the amount needed to serve all eligible children, Catawba County Social Services has the option to give some children priority for services. The names of all children who cannot be served will be maintained on a waiting list. When funds become available to reduce the waiting list, children will be removed in the order of priority. Within each priority group, families will be served on a first come, first serve basis.

Families in the following categories will be exempt from the waiting list:

- Priority #1 – Child Protective Services
- Priority #2 – Teen Parents enrolled the local school system
- Priority #3 – Foster Parents
  - Full or part time employed
  - Full or part time post-secondary education
- Priority #4 – Work First parents who are participating in mandatory activities (including Post-Secondary Education) to fulfill their Work First Employment and Training requirements and are in full compliance with their Mutual Responsibility Agreement.

Families will be served in the following order:

- Siblings of families that are currently receiving Day Care Services
- Chronological order based on the date that the family went on the waiting list

#### **D. Transportation**

Approximately \$12,000 from the Work First Block Grant will be allocated for transportation services for state fiscal year 2026-2028. Strategies included the utilization of:

- Public Transportation: Western Piedmont Regional Transit Authority – Greenway Public Transportation
- Mileage reimbursement – Work First families are reimbursed 21 cents per mile in order to participate in their component with a cap of \$100.00 per month
- Transportation for Work First recipients during their retention period – A maximum of four months' transportation assistance is provided for all Work First customers that are working (20 hours or more per week), no longer receiving Work First cash assistance and, as long as their income is below the 200% of poverty level.

#### **E. Substance Use/Mental Health**

It can be anticipated that many of the Work First participants with substance use, mental health issues, and/or disabilities will have difficulty meeting the goal of the Work First program.

Work First and The Cognitive Connection have committed to work together in order to craft a plan that addresses local community needs. As part of the Work First – Substance Abuse Initiative, The Cognitive Connection provides one FTE Qualified Professional Substance Abuse (QPSA) stationed on site at Social Services to conduct initial substance abuse screenings and assessments for the Work First population. The QPSA screens and makes appropriate referrals of other mental health issues. Substance abuse services provided by this program include, but are not limited to the following: Screenings, Assessments, Treatment Planning, Referral to Treatment Services and Case Management services. (MOA Attached)

Substance Use Screening: All Applicant/Recipients applying for the Work First program will be given an initial substance abuse screening by the Work First case manager – the Audit/Dast. If the results of this screening detect a possible substance issue, the QPSA or Licensed Professional will conduct a complete assessment.

Substance Use Assessments: The QPSA or Licensed Professional will conduct a substance abuse assessment, which will include an in-depth clinical interview and the use of a statewide-approved assessment tool.

Treatment Planning and Referral to Treatment Services: When the QPSA identifies a Work First participant as having a substance abuse issue, the QPSA begins the treatment planning process with the identified person. The

QPSA and customer will develop a Mutual Responsibility Agreement addressing these issues and appropriate referrals are made for treatment.

Community Support Services: The QPSA stationed at Social Services provides ongoing care coordination, including tracking of progress.

#### **F. Family Violence Option**

Violence in the family may be a substantial barrier to self-sufficiency for many families. Catawba County, recognizing the impact that violence can have on families, has a Memorandum of Agreement with Family Guidance in order to determine services needed and provide appropriate services to participants, as well as to determine the extent to which the violence is an impediment to self-sufficiency. Family Guidance will provide the following services:

- Individualized assessments for each participant referred by the Work First case manager. Based on the assessment the participant may receive ongoing counseling, psychological testing, and/or supportive services.
- Case consultation with the Work First case manager.

Catawba County Social Services – Work First and Family Guidance agrees to closely coordinate activities in order to assure a coordinated plan and no duplication of services. Family Guidance and Work First agrees to maintain said information in a strictly confidential manner.

If a participant is unable to participate in work activities or comply with other Work First requirements at the time of assessment, the participant may request a waiver. The Work First case manager will use the assessment report from Family Guidance in conjunction with other information concerning the case, to determine if a waiver should be granted and for how long.

#### **G. Other Services**

Vocational Rehabilitation: When a participant presents with a disability the Work First case manager will make a referral to Vocational Rehabilitation. All Work First applicants and recipients referred to Vocational Rehabilitation must complete the VR application and comply with all of their recommendations. Work First and Vocational Rehabilitation agree to closely coordinate activities in order to assure a coordinated plan and no duplication of services. (MOA attached)

#### **H. Maintenance of Effort (MOE)**

The following activities, staff and services will be funded using Maintenance of Effort (MOE) funds:

- Work First Staff
- TANF Fraud Investigative Staff
- Work First Participant Expenses
- Work First Child/Adult Care

- Work First Transportation Expenses
- Retention Services
- Enrichment Services
- Group Support
- Contract – Legal Aid
- Work First Cash – Emergency Assistance
- Others as needed

**I. Child Welfare Services**

Eighty-Three percent (83%) of the Work First Block Grant will be devoted to Child Welfare Services/ TANF CPS/FC/Adoption per fiscal year.



## VI. Emergency Assistance

Catawba County will continue to address the emergency needs of families with a combination of resources. Catawba County is fortunate to have numerous agencies in our county with resources available to help families that are facing an emergency situation. These agencies have a long history of serving the needs of families in crisis: Salvation Army, Greater Hickory Cooperative Christian Ministry and Eastern Catawba Cooperative Christian Ministry are just three of the agencies in our area providing these type of emergency assistance programs.

Catawba County Social Services will continue to appropriate a portion of its TANF allocation to the Emergency Assistance Program. As we have capitalized on our relationships with these community partners we have chosen to reduce the funding in this area so that we can better utilize our resources across the community and avoid duplication of efforts.

### **To be eligible for Emergency Assistance, the family must:**

- 1) Have a child that meets the Work First Family Assistance guidelines in the home who is related to the specified relative  
**or** be preparing for the return of a child (i.e. child being returned to home from foster care) within the next 60 days  
**or** be the legal custodian or guardian for a minor child in their care (Per Work First Manual)
- 2) Be a US citizen or an eligible alien.
- 3) Be in an emergency situation caused by *circumstances beyond the control of the family* (loss or significant decrease in income, fire, unusual medical expenses that have left the family unable to meet their normal living expenses, etc.)
- 4) Have total countable reserve equal to or below \$3000. Liquid assets are limited to \$300. Vehicles are not counted in reserve. Liquid assets are cash on hand, current savings account balance, checking account balance (except what is needed to pay bills), stocks, bonds, mutual fund shares, savings certificates and revocable trust funds.
- 5) Have a monthly total countable income equal to or below 200% of the federal poverty level. Countable income is the same as for Work First Family Assistance. Use a base period of the month prior to the month of application. Convert income to a monthly amount (by using conversion factors of 4.3, 2.15). Add together the countable earned and unearned income. Compare to the income chart to determine if income eligible.
- 6) Cannot have received EA within the past twelve months.
- 7) Must apply for EA in the county in which they live.
- 8) Is eligible for a 30-day period, once approved. Payments may not exceed \$300 in a 30-day period. Benefits may not be provided under EA more than one time in a twelve-month period.

- 9) Must cooperate with Child Support, if there is not already an open child support case and if there is no cost, before the EA application can be approved (within 5 days).
- 10) Must be evaluated for Food and Nutrition Services, if not already receiving before the EA application can be approved (within 5 days).

**The Agency must:**

- 1) Make a decision to approve or deny the EA application within five workdays from the date of application.

**Evaluation of Emergencies**

- 1) EA cannot be used to improve the family's standard of living.
- 2) Explore whether any member of the family will have income that can be used to meet the emergency. (Will they get paid again before the power bill is due?)
- 3) Explore with them the steps they have taken to alleviate the emergency.
- 4) Evaluate whether or not the family has experienced a sudden change that has led to a decrease in income or created an extra expense
- 5) Evaluate to determine if they caused their own emergency. Do they have a history of being in a crisis situation? If so, explore other options.
- 6) Determine if EA will prevent recurrence of the emergency. Will they be able to maintain on an ongoing basis if we alleviate this emergency or will they have the same problem next month?
- 7) If the family has been penalized for failure to comply with WFFA program requirements, and the emergency could have been prevented had they complied, deny the EA application.
- 8) Catawba County will allow for medical services such as prescriptions, eyeglasses, and doctor visits if the expense is not covered by the Medicaid Program **and** the individual is receiving Medicaid. (MOE)
- 9) TANF funds will not be used to assist with rent if the applicant is already receiving other federal, state, local subsidized rent.

The following services will be provided with TANF Emergency Assistance:

- To assist with rent in order to maintain the shelter, unless family is already receiving other federal, state, local subsidized rent.
- Assistance with utilities if not related to Heating or Cooling.
- Medical services such as prescriptions, eyeglasses, and doctor visits if the expense is not covered by the Medicaid Program **and** the individual is receiving Medicaid (see #8 above)

## **VII. Services to Low Income Families (under 200% of Poverty)**

Catawba County's unemployment rate is currently at 3.3%. With the increase in employment opportunities, we have experienced a decrease in those requesting these services. Catawba County is fortunate to also have agencies in our community that can assist families with some of these services so that families are able to continue to be self-sufficient. Even with a decrease in the number of requests for these services, Catawba County will continue to offer this program. However, because of the decrease in the requests for this service we have decreased the funding in this area to better utilize these resources.

Catawba County will provide services to families with income at or below 200% of poverty when: the family is a former Work First family, the adult is working, the custodial parent is cooperating with child support, the adult is receiving or has applied for Food Assistance and Family Medicaid, and the services provided will assist the adult in maintaining employment which will keep the family from reentering the traditional Work First Program.

The following services may be provided:

- Short term housing;
- Child and Family Enrichment Activities;
- Transportation;
- Child Care;
- Parenting training/services;
- Work-related expenses; and
- Case management.
- Other appropriate services that can be funded by TANF and MOE that would prevent the family from losing employment and returning to Work First.

Eligibility for services will be determined per state policy:

- Family's total gross monthly income is at or below 200% of the federal poverty level (accept family's statement, unless it is questionable);
- Same definition of a family as used for current Work First participants;
- At least one child in the family must be under 18 and meet the same kinship and living with rules as current Work First families; and
- Complete and maintain the eligibility worksheet.

All Work First citizens who are subject to the work requirements will be served before offering or providing the above listed services to "families with children at or below the 200% federal poverty level." Catawba County will ensure that all Work First citizens are served first through the organization of the Work First unit. In Catawba County, it is the responsibility of the Work First Case Manager to implement the entire Work First Program -- cash assistance and employment. Therefore, from the moment the applicant presents

her/himself for any of the Work First services, the focus is on helping the family meet their financial needs through employment and child support. On the day of application, the case manager begins to lay the foundation and ground rules for the program.

**VIII. Services to Non-Custodial Parents (optional)**

Catawba County will not offer services to non-custodial parents.

**IX. Exemption from the Work Requirements**

Catawba County will follow the State Policy regarding exemptions from the Work Requirement for a single parent with a child under the age of one (1) and allow a 12-month exemption.

## X. Innovative County Strategies

Catawba County has historically demonstrated creative and highly effective collaborative efforts combining the skills and resources of multiple agencies and programs. The same is true of this effort. Several successful initiatives are currently in place to protect children and strengthen families. These projects include:

Legal Services for Child Only Cases: Catawba County has a contract with Legal Aid of North Carolina to provide legal services to ‘child only’ Work First Family Assistance citizens and, if applicable and appropriate, to ‘regular’ Work First Family Assistance citizens to increase the family stability for the children. The legal services provided included:

- Counsel and Advice
- Preparation of documents such as education affidavits, health care consent forms
- Representation in custody, guardianship, and adoption proceedings

Catawba County Career Center: Catawba County’s Career Center is located at the Division of Workforce Solutions - NC Works office. The center’s partners include:

- Social Services – Work First
- Catawba Valley Community College
- Division of Workforce Solutions
- Vocational Rehabilitation
- Goodwill Industries
- Cognitive Connection
- Senior Community Service Employment Program

The services offered at the center include:

- Career Testing/Assessment
- Mock Interviews
- Job Referral and Listings
- Labor Market Information
- Referrals for Supporting Services
- Resume Preparation

Retention Services: Catawba County provides a one-time lump sum Employment Retention Bonus of \$400 to Work First participants whose Work First check terminates due to earned income and who remain employed:

- With the same employer (unless the change is an improvement), and

- Employed full time (30+ hours per week) for four consecutive months following termination of their Work First Cash benefit, and
- Income eligible based on the 200% level of poverty worksheet

## **XI. Special Issues**

Catawba County had an unemployment rate of 3.3% in October 2024 while the State's rate was 3.7%. 12.5% of Catawba County's citizens over the age of 25 do not have a high school degree or equivalent while nearly all of the jobs available in Catawba County require a minimum of a high school degree or equivalent.



## **XII. Eligibility**

Catawba County will follow criteria established and implemented by the State regarding for the following:

- Definition of Relationships;
- Payment levels (EA, 200% services, child welfare);
- Countable Income;
- Sanctions;
- Time Limits and Extensions;
- Exemptions, and exceptions to requirements;

Applicants must apply for Medicaid or be receiving Medicaid before applying for Work First.

Catawba County proposes changes to the following policies. These changes will be implemented once the State and Catawba County's plan has been approved.

### **1. Benefit Diversion Requirements:**

Catawba County will follow the State regarding benefit diversion with the following exceptions:

Applicant must cooperate with Child Support, apply or be receiving Food Assistance, and the applicant must register with Division of Work Force Solutions - NC Works if not already employed or job being held for the applicant and if monetarily eligible for Unemployment Benefits (UIB) must apply for the UIB prior to approval of the Benefit Diversion application.

### **2. Cooperation with Child Support is an eligibility requirement:**

Applicant must cooperate with child support within 12 calendar days of applying for WFFA. If the applicant fails or refuses to do so without good cause, deny the application for WFFA and notify the Medicaid worker (applicants must apply for Medicaid before applying for WFFA).

### **3. Evaluate for or be receiving Food Assistance:**

Applicant must be receiving Food Assistance or be evaluated for Food Assistance within 12 calendar days of applying for WFFA. If the applicant fails or refuses to do so without good cause, deny the application for WFFA and notify the Medicaid worker (applicants must apply for Medicaid before applying for WFFA).

### **4. Vocational Rehabilitation:**

All Work First recipients referred to Vocational Rehabilitation as part of their Outcome Plan (MRA) must complete the application and comply with all recommendations. Failure or refusal to comply without good cause will result in the case being terminated. Future eligibility is contingent upon completing the application and cooperating with Vocational Rehabilitation.

### **5. Job Quit:**

Job quit (treated the same as non-compliance with the MRAs) will be applied to (all cases that an adult is included in the grant) that have been informed of the

Job Quit Policy at any time in their history of receiving Work First and who voluntarily quit a job, refuse to accept a bona fide job offer, request a reduction in hours, all without good cause or are terminated with cause. The following statement from the MRA-B will be added to MRA-A “I will accept and keep any reasonable job offered to me. I will not quit a job, refuse an offer of employment or fail to follow up on job referrals without good cause.”

**6. Eligible Household:**

Cases where all children in the household are receiving SSI, Foster Care or Adoption Assistance benefits will not be eligible for Work First as there is no eligible child in the home. This does not apply to Benefit Diversion cases.

**7. Recertifications for Child Only Cases:**

For child only recertifications the caretaker can complete the required interview via telephone instead of face-to-face.

**8. Resource Requirements:**

Eliminate the resources limits for Child Only Cases. The county will follow the state’s standard policy for all other cases.

**9. County Transfers:**

When a Work First case is transferred to Catawba County, an appointment will be made for a client to come to the office within ten business days to sign a new MRA and be evaluated for any needed documentation. Failure to keep the appointment will result in the WF case being closed at the end of the current month (unless there is good cause).

**10. Reopen/Reapplication:**

If a Work First case is closed for any reason (without good cause), the case will not be eligible for re-open. The applicant/recipient may reapply for Work First.

**11. Work Requirements/Services:**

All adults in an Employment case must have a High School Degree or equivalent OR be enrolled in a GED or Adult High School classes unless there is good cause.

**12. Support Services:**

A Child Enhancement fund will be created to work with families in providing financial assistance to enhance the quality of life for the child. Examples: band fees, uniform fees, dues for Girl Scouts/Boy Scouts, etc.

**XIII. Community Service**

Catawba County will not utilize the Community Service Component

#### **XIV. Appeals Process**

Catawba County will have a two-tier appeals process that substantially complies with state law (G.S. 108A-79).

A line supervisor in the Family Support Division who has not had any involvement with the family or the case will conduct the first tier of the hearing process. Unless the family requests an extension with good cause, this hearing must be held within five workdays of the request. A written statement of the decision must be served by certified mail to the appellant within five working days of the first tier hearing. The first-tier hearing follows all of the time frames and conditions of state/standard county policy.

If the family wishes to appeal the decision rendered by the first tier appeal, the family must notify Catawba County Social Services within 15 days of the date the initial decision was mailed to the appellant. If the appellant withdraws their request for the second-tier appeal prior to the hearing date the decision of the first-tier hearing stands. The second tier hearing will take place within ten workdays and will be recorded. A supervisor who has not had any involvement with the family or the case will conduct the second-tier hearing. The hearing officer will render his/her decision within 45 days.

Catawba County policy will differ from G.S. 108A-79 in that the Hearing Officer who conducts the second tier hearing has only 45 days to render a decision and that decision will be considered final.

Any applicant/recipient who is dissatisfied with the final decision of the Department may file, within 30 days of receipt of notice of such decision, a petition for judicial review in Superior Court of Catawba County. Failure to file a petition within the time stated shall operate as a waiver of the right of such party to review.

**XV. Review Prior to Expiration of Time Limits**

Catawba County will continue to follow criteria established and implemented by the State for reviewing cases prior to the expiration of time limits. In addition, the supervisor will review and monitor weekly/monthly state reports regarding families time limits. The supervisor will continue to complete monthly staffing with the Work First case managers to review the time used by each participant to discuss actions that are needed to be taken to empower the family to move towards self-sufficiency.

Each time a Mutual Responsibility Agreement is developed, the Eligibility Tracking Update screen will be reviewed, discussed and signed by the case manager and participant to ensure that both parties are aware of the months left on the time clock.

## XVI. Funding Requirements

Amount of the county block grant earmarked for Child Welfare Services is 83% for all fiscal years.

Amount of the county block grant designated for Work First Diversion Assistance, Work First Family Assistance, Work First Services and Maintenance of Effort contribution:

	WFBG	MOE	Total	
Child Welfare Services	\$ 2,292,585.00	\$ 1,082,850.00	\$ 3,375,435.00	
TANF CPS/FC/Adoption	\$ 179,840.00	\$ -	\$ 179,840.00	
<b>Total WFBG for Children</b>	<b>\$ 2,472,425.00</b>	<b>\$ 1,082,850.00</b>	<b>\$ 3,555,275.00</b>	<b>83%</b>
WF Administration	\$ 5,000.00	\$ 480,000.00	\$ 485,000.00	
WF Child Enhancement Fund		\$ 2,000.00	\$ 2,000.00	
WF Other Purchased Svcs		\$ 7,500.00	\$ 7,500.00	
WF Emergency Asst		\$ 10,000.00	\$ 10,000.00	
WF 200%		\$ 2,500.00	\$ 2,500.00	
WF Family Assistance	\$ 195,000.00		\$ 195,000.00	
WF Benefit Diversion	\$ 5,000.00		\$ 5,000.00	
<b>Total WFBG for Families</b>	<b>\$ 205,000.00</b>	<b>\$ 502,000.00</b>	<b>\$ 707,000.00</b>	<b>17%</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>\$ 2,677,425.00</b>	<b>\$ 1,584,850.00</b>	<b>\$ 4,262,275.00</b>	

\*See page 17, Section VI Emergency Services for an explanation of funding.

\*\* See page 19, Section VII Service to Low Income Families for an explanation of funding.

**XVII. Certification**

As Chairman of the Catawba County Board of Commissioners, I hereby certify that during each fiscal year to which this plan is applicable:  
This program will be known as the Catawba County Work First Program;

The provision described in this plan will be carried out in accordance with state and federal law;

This plan was developed based upon recommendations of the Planning Committee, current Work First participants, and Social Service/Work First Staff.

I also certify that:

The citizens of Catawba County have been given an opportunity to review this plan.

The Catawba County Board of County Commissioners has approved this plan and is the entity responsible for the Catawba County Work First Program.

\_\_\_\_\_  
C. Randall Isenhower, Chair  
Catawba County Board of Commissioners

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date