

Avery County Work First Plan
2020-2021

I. Conditions within the County

Avery County is one of the smaller rural counties in the Western North Carolina Mountains. Currently, Avery County has a population of approximately 17,557; 14.7% are children under 18 years of age, only 11.5% are minorities. The median age is 44.5 and the median household income is \$37,109. High School graduates average 82.3% with 22.5% holding a Bachelor's Degree. Avery County maintains Appalachian Mountain heritage, and many of its' families have resided in the community for many generations.

The economic situation in Avery County has continued to be fair, with an unemployment rate of approximately 4.6% (Unemployment Rate for Avery averages 4 to 5%, respectfully). The **average hourly** rate for entry level jobs is \$8.78, but a large number of the jobs at this rate do not provide benefits. Avery County has a large number of families that are underemployed and underinsured, which creates a large need for a variety of human services in our county. Avery County's largest industry is Christmas trees, followed by travel and tourism. The one textile mill in Avery County closed in 2016 which has forced workers to find employment outside of the county. Presently, Avery County has a 14.7% poverty rate, and the average household income is approximately \$37,109.

There remains a great demand for Certified Nursing Assistants, as well as nurses in a number of Health Care Facilities/Organizations in the community. The county continues to grow in the Medical Professional areas, which is becoming a major contributor to the labor force.

Avery County Government has approximately 250 employees and the County continues to increase salaries and improve benefits. The N.C. Department of Corrections play a major role in Avery County, providing over 400 jobs with excellent state benefits. There are over 400 businesses in Avery County, but salaries and benefits vary greatly among the private sector.

Avery County DSS has been successful in maintaining a Work First caseload of 15 child only cases. We continue to look for ways to help families achieve self-sufficiency. We offer supportive services to families in need, such as, food stamps, health choice, child support, childcare, emergency assistance, employee services, etc. We will continue to collaborate with other agencies to broaden our understanding of needs in our community.

Avery County strongly supports education and training to help participants find better paying jobs with benefits. This area is difficult, but we will continue our work toward helping people become self-sufficient. Our office offers incentives to obtain GEDs and gives Work First and At-Risk families the opportunity to further their training and education. We work cooperatively with NC Works agencies and our local Mayland Community College to accomplish this goal, and make additional referrals to other helping programs.

Avery County DSS utilizes the Family Centered Practice regarding the families its serves. Family Centered Practice puts families first, putting them in the center of the services process. The Agency's Child Welfare Social Workers and Work First Case Manager work together under the supervision of the DSS director to arrive at the best possible outcomes for Family's in our community. It is the goal of Avery County DSS to surround each family in need with capable professionals, who can access appropriate services needed by the family. Family Centered Practice focuses on the family, determines the needs, puts services in place, and continues to monitor progress until goal is achieved.

Avery County operates in compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act (**ADA**), and offers specialized services (interpreters, access, specialized attention, etc.), which accommodates those with disabilities, stated in the following:

- The Avery County Administration Building is accessible to the Disabled Public.
- Avery County does not discriminate on the basis of disability (physical and mental) and assist everyone in their pursuit of public assistance and services.

•Avery County DSS provides a user-friendly environment for those, who have special challenges and will do whatever is necessary to serve those in need.

Avery County will continue to focus on At-Risk families under 200% of poverty (twice the poverty level). This is a preventative approach to eliminate long-term welfare, which also provides supportive services to working families.

II. Planning Process

A. Planning Committee

The Work First Planning Committee is composed of DSS Staff, local business leaders, County Manager, County Commissioners, DSS Board, Non-profit agencies and other individuals, and agencies.

B. Public Comment

The public will be notified by an ad placed in the Avery Journal Times Work First Plan is available to review at the Avery County DSS and at www.averydss.com from 08/01/2020 through 07/31/2021. In addition, the Planning Committee will have an opportunity to review the Plan and make comments, which will be addressed.

C. Planning Process Work

Work First Planning Committee meetings provide an overview of the Work First Program including pertinent data, performance measures, and updates on the Work First Program, collaborations and discussion of barriers and gaps in services. Suggestions are welcomed from committee members and incorporated into the plan.

III. Outcome and Goals for the County

A. Statewide Work First Goals

1. Employment –Self-sufficiency will be realized primarily through the employment of Work First Participants. Avery County’s goal has not yet been determined by the state.

2. Meeting Federal Participation Rates –The All Families Participation Rate is 50%. The Two-Parent Participation Rate is 90%.

3. Providing Employment Services-The goal for Avery County is 80% for all families and 100% for 2 parent families.

4. Benefit Diversion-The goal has not yet been determined by the State.

5. Staying off Welfare-90% of participants stay off welfare after going to work.

6. Job Retention-60% of the Work First Families who leave Work First for employment will continue to be working in 6 months and 50% of the Work First Families who leave Work First for employment will be employed after 12 months. Avery County has achieved some goal success regarding Work First which is evident in decreasing caseloads and fewer return clients. The State has shown similar decreases statewide, and plan is to re-invest TANF dollars to provide Child Welfare Services, to focus on At-Risk families under 200% of poverty, to provide retention services, and provide supportive services to current and former participants

B. County Developed Goals

Avery County will continue the following goals as suggested by the Work First Planning Committee:

1. DSS will maintain a close working relationship between DSS and other agencies. DSS Community Employment Case Manager will work with other agencies that are involved with Work First Participants. An and continue to work together with other agencies to develop and implement plans for each participant so everyone is committed to the same goals.

2. Transportation continues to be problematic. However, Work First Employment Case Management has been able to address barriers by arranging for a down payment on vehicles, gas vouchers, assisting with auto insurance payments, purchasing tires, especially in the winter since Avery County usually has bad winter weather and contracting with Avery Transportation.

3. Child only cases are assessed for services to maintain children in the home and/or promote permanence and safety.

IV. Plans to Achieve the Outcomes and Goals

A. Activities

1. Employment or putting adults to work from the initial application, participants are encouraged and expected to find work. In many cases, the participant may find work prior to being approved for the program. Work Search education is provided and various websites are given to clients such as NC Works, Simply Hired, Indeed as well as the local newspapers.
2.
 - 2. Meeting Federal Participants Rate This is an area that always needs improvement. Smaller Counties have difficulties meeting the participation rate. Participants are referred to work, job ready activities, or work experience. We will offer Job Ready Classes in cooperation with other NC Works and Mayland Community college.
 - 3. Providing Employment Services Our focus is to provide employment services. Our Community Employment Case Manager researches and identifies the jobs that are available and refers participants to jobs once the barriers have been eliminated. Post-employment plan is put in place to monitor on-going progress.
 - 4. Benefit Diversion We make great use of the Benefit Diversion. This prevents families from being approved for the

ongoing program and prevents long term dependency. When Benefit Diversion is utilized the client can remain self-sufficient and return to employment quickly. It is important to note that any able-bodied participant will immediately begin active job search and/or training to achieve employment.

- 5. Staying Off Welfare Avery County is achieving this goal by providing EA services, as well as an array of Supportive Employment Services like car repair, insurance, vouchers for gas, etc. We try to offer extensive supportive services and refer participants to other programs.
- 6. Job Retention We will continue to offer follow-up services to promote job retention and prevent welfare dependency.

V. Administration

A. Authority

The authority of administration of the Work First Program will continue to be Avery County DSS as designed by the Avery County Commissioners. It is still the desire of the County to be **Standard Status**.

B. Organization

Avery County DSS and NC Works are no longer located in the County Administrative Building but steps have been made to assure that services are still accessible to the public. Other agencies involved with this team are Vocational Rehabilitation, Avery County Schools, Cooperative Extension, Mayland Community College, and WAMY Community Action. The Team promotes employment, education, and training to all customers. Presently, Avery County has one Work First Caseworker classified as a Community Employment Case Manager, who does both employment and eligibility functions. All needs are being met in this area.

1. **Intake** -The Community Employment Case Manager takes applications and processes them for TANF including child

only cases and Benefit Diversion. There is a back-up system in place to assist when CECM worker is unavailable.

2. **Emergency Assistance**- The CECM takes applications with supervisor as back-up to CECM. The system can be thoroughly tracked with an online spreadsheet.
3. **Employability Assessment**-The Work First Case Manager completes the Employability Assessment and discusses the MRA and Plan of Action. A plan is developed to address and avoid barriers.
4. **Employment Services**- Work First Case Manager approves participants for job search activities, work experience, and/or sends them out on job interviews. The WF worker helps to alleviate barriers that prohibit the participant from working.
5. **Other Supportive Services**-WF Worker offers additional supportive services, such as car repair, insurance, mileage, proper work attire, equipment necessary for the job, etc. Continued services are available to participants under 200% of poverty level.
6. **Eligibility Determination** - The Work First Case Manager also determines eligibility for WF Program and does all required maintenance of the caseload.

C. Child Care

Work First funds can be used, if participants are working, until participants can be reached on the subsidy waiting list, if one exists. The priority for Child Care Subsidy is: (1) Child Protective Services (2) Child Welfare Services (3) Employment (4) Education and Training (5) Developmental Delays.

D. Transportation

Transportation was identified as the number one barrier for Work First Participants. We have an agreement with the Avery Transportation Authority to transport Work First Participants on a case by case basis and as can be arranged. Avery County is a small rural town and has no private transportation resources (taxi, buses, etc.). Our agency will assist families with down payments for vehicles, car repairs, auto insurance, tires, as well as auto loan payments.

E. Substance Abuse Services

We collaborate very closely with substance abuse counselors with local Mental Health Care Agencies, and WF Case Manager administers quick assessment on all Work First Pay after Performance applicants and current recipients at the time of the review. If there is an indication of substance abuse, then the recipient will be referred to a qualified substance abuse counselor. If treatment is needed, then the counselor will oversee the treatment and keep DSS advised of progress. DSS has agreements with local mental health providers.

F. Family Violence Option

The Director of Avery County DSS and the Work First Case Manager will continue to work in collaboration with Oasis to assist participants and discuss case referrals. If domestic violence is identified as a problem, the assessment services of Oasis will be secured by DSS to further develop and implement services needed by the family. The partnership between DSS and Oasis has been very successful and long-term positive outcomes have been achieved.

G. Maintenance of Effort (MOE)

MOE funds are used to pay for the following:

- Work First Administration
- Work First Community Employment Case Manager
- Work First Services
- Work First Case (Emergency Assistance)
- Work First Participation Expenses

- Child Welfare Service as needed
- Fraud Worker doing Work First Activities

VI. Services for Families with Income at or below 200% Poverty

1. Emergency Assistance

Avery County spent approximately \$51,000 toward Emergency Assistance during our last fiscal year (19-20), which served a total of 110 families, averaging \$463.63 per family household. Emergency Assistance funds are used to help families with rent, mortgage payments & utilities. The State of NC has specific guidelines for this program that we must adhere to in payment of expenses for clients. Emergency Assistance Funds for 2020-2021 are \$51,000.00.

Families must meet the following criteria to be served:

- Related child under 18 years old living the family home (exception: until child is 19 years old if they are expected to graduate by 19)
- Household income at or below 200% of poverty (twice the current poverty level)
- Citizenship requirements
- \$600.00 per year limit this amount can be increased with approval of the WF supervisor and DSS director.
- One month's rent, lot rent, mortgage payment, utilities, (electric or water bills) and used only for a specific emergency or episode of need.

2. Supportive Services at or below 200% PIL

We will provide services to low-income families who need support to maintain self-sufficiency and avoid becoming Work First recipients as well as supporting former Work First Clients to help them maintain employment.

Our agency will provide employment related services up to \$800 Maximum per fiscal year Assistance will include but not limited to:

- assistance with car repairs,
- auto insurance, mortgage payment, homeowners insurance, rent payment, lot rent, utility payment
- tires, (tires must be worn and a safety hazard)
- purchase of uniforms related to employment (not to exceed \$200),
- gas vouchers for new employment of clients, (amount of vouchers will be determined by CECM based on assessment of each individual case and not to exceed \$100 per fiscal year per HH).
- Work related expenses (i.e. stethoscope/bp cuff for CNA's, uniforms)
- Clothing allowance for school aged children: \$200 per child up to the maximum of \$800 total per household (shoes, socks, pants, shirts, underwear, pj's, jackets/coats, school supplies).
- Children under the age of 4 - \$175 per child, up to the maximum of \$800 total per household; (diapers, clothing, pj's socks, shoes, jackets/coats)
- Other identified expenses that enhances a person's ability to get a job or keep a job. Identified expenses will be at the discretion of the CECM and WFFA supervisor.

VII. Services for Non-Custodial Parents of Work First Recipient Children

Avery County will not provide services for non-custodial parents of Work First recipients' children (if you do not have custody of your children, you are not eligible) using Work First Block Grant funds.

VIII. Exemption from the Work Requirement

Avery County will exempt single custodial parents of newborns (Birth to 12 months) from the work requirements for 12 months. This is a one-time exemption. This has a lifetime limit of 12 months due to pregnancy.

IX. Medicaid

Medicaid remains an entitlement program and medical regulations provides that families have the right to apply for Medicaid without delay. Application for Medicaid will not be delayed due to requirements for Work First Family Assistance.

X. Certification

Barbara Jones

7.17.2020

Barbara Jones, Director Avery County DSS

Date

