

CALWORKS OVERVIEW FOR LINKAGES TEAMS

Understanding the CalWORKs Process from Application to Aftercare

INTRODUCTION

This presentation provides an overview of the CalWORKs program in California. The information is intended for Linkages teams, whose work intersects both CalWORKs and child welfare systems, and aims to enhance understanding and collaboration between these systems.

California operates a **county-administered public assistance program**, which means that although state guidelines and laws provide a framework, individual counties have significant flexibility in developing policies and practices. As a result, procedures and terminology may vary slightly between counties. This document strives to present a general overview while acknowledging points of variability.

There will be a Welfare to Work Overview coming soon as a follow-up to this CalWORKs presentation.

WHY UNDERSTANDING CALWORKS MATTERS FOR LINKAGES

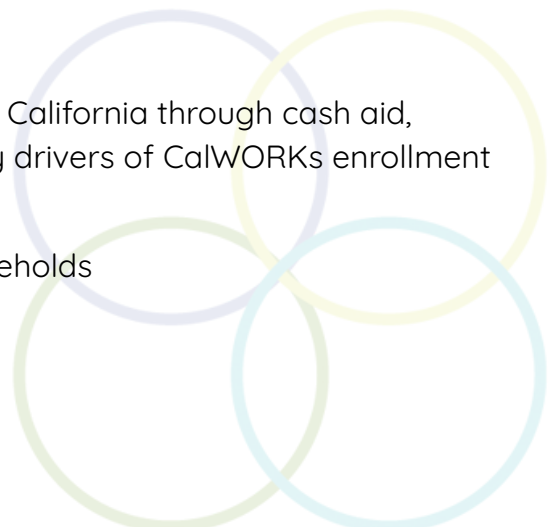
Families served by Linkages are often simultaneously engaged with both the **child welfare and CalWORKs systems**, creating a need for integrated, trauma-informed collaboration. By deepening our understanding of CalWORKs, we can:

- Help families navigate both systems more effectively
- Support preventative efforts to reduce child welfare involvement
- Potentially shorten the duration of child welfare cases
- Provide Resources and Services to assist families

A SNAPSHOT OF CALWORKS IN CALIFORNIA

As of 2025, CalWORKs supports over 340,000 families across California through cash aid, employment services, and supportive programs. The primary drivers of CalWORKs enrollment include:

- Economic hardship, especially among single-parent households
- Unemployment or underemployment
- Housing instability and rising living costs
- Barriers to education and job access



Systemic inequities also shape who enters and benefits from the program. Black or African American families and families from Spanish-speaking diasporas are disproportionately represented in CalWORKs caseload, often reflecting broader patterns of economic exclusion and structural racism. In response, California is implementing key reforms, including:

- Expanding access to education and training programs
- Reducing punitive sanctions and streamlining enrollment (SB 119)
- Integrating CalWORKs with housing, mental health, and childcare supports

CASELOAD TRENDS AND SYSTEM COMPLEXITY

Over the past decade, CalWORKs caseloads have steadily declined. This trend reflects broader economic shifts, expanded access to employment and education, and targeted efforts to reduce barriers to entry. Additionally, increased investments in childcare, mental health, and housing supports have helped families stabilize without long-term reliance on aid.

Despite these gains, the CalWORKs system remains complex - especially at the point of entry. Families often face:

- Lengthy and layered eligibility screenings
- Confusing documentation requirements
- Inconsistent access to supportive services across counties
- Sanctions and time limits that can disrupt progress

WHAT IS CALWORKS?

CalWORKs is an acronym that stands for California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids. It is California's public assistance program that provides cash aid and services to eligible families with children. When a family applies for CalWORKs, they are applying for cash assistance, CalFresh (food assistance), and Medi-Cal benefits. It's designed to help families meet basic needs while supporting them in meeting their goals. Families can apply online at the benefitscal.com website, or by applying in person at their local county office.

WHO IS ELIGIBLE FOR CALWORKS?

To be eligible to CalWORKs a person must be pregnant or caring for a child up to age 18, up to age 19 if the child is a full-time high school or vocational school student expected to graduate before their 19th birthday, or under 21 if disabled. You must be a U.S. citizen or qualified alien and a resident of California. Household income and resources will be evaluated during the eligibility process. Individuals evading prosecution, custody, or confinement after being convicted of a felony or attempting to commit one or convicted drug felons cannot receive aid, but their children may be still eligible. Immunizations are required for children under 6, and all children over 6 must attend school.

APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS AND TIMEFRAMES

CalWORKs must determine eligibility for a family within 30 days of the application date. People applying for CalWORKs will be asked to provide verification/documentation of the above-listed eligibility requirements. This may include photo ID, social security numbers, birth and/or marriage certificates. Custody documents if applicable. They must provide proof of CA residency and citizenship/immigration documentation. Verification of all money the household

receives such as employment via paystubs or proof of self-employment, social security, unemployment, or disability payments. Verification of property or assets like a bank statement, vehicle registration, life insurance and other documents that will be used to determine eligibility. The sooner the verifications are given, the sooner eligibility can be determined.

CALWORKS AND CHILD SUPPORT PAYMENTS

When a person applies for CalWORKs and they have a child whose other parent does not live with them, as a part of eligibility, the program may refer them to the child support agency. Most of the child support collected goes to reimburse the state for the aid they're receiving. Once a person stops receiving CalWORKs, the child support agency will continue to collect child support on their behalf. If they no longer receive CalWORKs, 100% of any current support received will go directly to the custodial parent, not the state. If a person refuses to cooperate with child support enforcement, they may face penalties up to being discontinued from Medi-Cal services unless proof is provided that cooperation could lead to emotional or physical harm. (encourage families to talk to their eligibility worker about applying for an exemption) The Child Support agency will review what the family reported and consider any current agreements that the family has. Remember! Both parents are responsible for caring for the children. If the CalWORKs case is an unmarried household, paternity may also be established. You can find out more information related to child support by going to their website: [CA Child Support Services](#).

AFTER APPROVAL, WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Once approved, the family will receive an Electronic Benefits Transaction Card (EBT Card). They will be notified based on their CalWORKs case number when the cash and food benefits will be loaded onto the card, and they will also receive a Benefits Identification Card (BIC) in the mail for Medi-Cal services. Once Medi-Cal is approved, the system generates a Benefits Identification Card or BIC that is mailed to the address provided at application. If a member of the case already has a BIC, that card will be re-activated and they will not receive a new one unless requested. Once approved for Medi-Cal, a family is encouraged to pick a Managed care plan- IEHP, LA Care, Molina, etc.

Additional resources are provided to families through Managed care plans and as Cal AIM continues to grow, so do those available resources! Medi-Cal benefits also provide dental services through Denti-Cal, and vision services. [Welcome to the Medi-Cal Dental Program](#)

WHAT IS CALWORKS REUNIFICATION CASH AID (AB 135/LINKAGES)

All County Letter 23-94 and AB135 state that when a CalWORKs active family has had ALL children removed by child welfare CalWORKs must return the family to active CalWORKs and allow the family to receive cash aid for a maximum of 6 months after the 30-day temporary absence period IF the family has been recommended by the child welfare agency to receive cash aid and/or services to support Family Reunification.

CALWORKS PROGRAMS, RESOURCES AND SERVICES

Once determined eligible, families can then utilize the CalWORKs program and all that it has to offer:

- CalWORKs Eviction Prevention Program
- Temporary Homeless assistance
- Home Visiting Program
- Welfare to Work
- Family Stabilization Services
- Housing Support Program

POTENTIAL LINKAGES MUTUAL FAMILY

Linkages can make a difference for families even without FR Cash Aid. When notified that a family receiving child welfare services is potentially Eligible for CalWORKs, CalWORKs can attempt to expedite the application once all required documentation is received.

When communication is received that all children have been removed from the household of an active CalWORKs case, the 30-Day temporary absence period must begin. The child welfare agency must notify CalWORKs of their case plan recommendation (within the 30-day temporary absence period) that the provision of cash aid, childcare and/or reunification services are necessary for reunification, and the reunification plan is in effect.

CALWORKS FR CASH AID TIMEFRAMES

A family can receive CalWORKs FR Cash Aid for a maximum of 6 months after the 30-day temporary absence period. The child welfare case plan can include an extension for services only and those services can be extended up to 12 months based on the child welfare case plan recommendation.

LINKAGES CALWORKS PREGNANT PERSONS ONLY (PPO)

For PPO cases, when the newborn is removed at birth by the CWS agency, the case will remain open during the initial temporary absence period. If the CWS agency does not provide a recommendation for CalWORKs FR by the end of the temporary absence period, the PPO case will remain open until the end of the Semi-Annual Reporting or SAR period in accordance with ACL 12-25. At this point, if CWS does not recommend CalWORKs FR services and cash aid, the case will be discontinued if there are no other eligible children in the home.

COLLABORATION AND COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Thanks to Linkages, case workers from CalWORKs, Welfare to Work and child welfare share information and co-develop plans with families, so the family gets one cohesive strategy instead of conflicting demands from separate agencies. This maximizes use of funding, services, and staff time.

Families feel more supported when agencies work together and communicate clearly. It builds trust in the system and encourages engagement with services.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES: LINKAGES FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

These principles are fundamental for effective family engagement practice when child welfare and CalWORKs are working together to help families.

- Involve the family in all matters pertaining to their future.
- Value and reinforce consistent communication and persistent collaboration.
- Share a strength-based, family-centered, trauma-informed approach to practice across both service systems.

When conducting assessments, it is important to understand the family's needs, strengths, circumstances, and history through the lens of their involvement in CalWORKs and the child welfare system.

Key activities include:

- Determining if a family is involved in the other program at the time of intake.

- Exploring the family's strengths, needs, and goals in the context of child safety and family stability.
- Collaborating across programs to inform safety planning for mutual families.

Be sure to:

- Help families prioritize child safety and economic stability needs to focus service planning efforts.
- Adhere to standard confidentiality requirements.
- Utilize court ordered case plans to promote participation in Welfare to Work (WTW) activities.

Coordination and care management best practices include:

- Establishing basic knowledge about the services of the other program.
- Coordinating child welfare case plans and WTW plans to improve a family's chances for success.
- Transforming existing case planning meetings into coordinated case planning sessions.
- Being flexible about using other mechanisms for coordination beyond formal multi-disciplinary team meetings.

We can partner together and

- Celebrate family accomplishments to boost their confidence for taking on more complex goals.
- Conduct ongoing screening for a family's participation in or potential eligibility for CalWORKs throughout the CWS case lifespan.
- Review CalWORKs status factors (e.g., sanctions, exemptions) that may impact the parent's ability to engage in service activities.

Providing enough ongoing support to ensure that the gains families have made through Linkages collaboration are sustained following formal system involvement is essential to long-term success.

Transition planning and after-care activities include:

- Helping the family to connect with a community network of services and supports prior to ending system involvement. concluded.
- Managing the possibility of one of the plans continuing for a time after the other has concluded.

The vision is that every family applying for CalWORKs will have access to holistic support, and that child welfare agencies will know how to connect families to resources before intervention becomes necessary.