
THIRD READING

Bill No: AB 969
Author: Celeste Rodriguez (D), et al.
Amended: 8/29/25 in Senate
Vote: 21

SENATE HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE: 5-0, 7/7/25

AYES: Arreguín, Ochoa Bogh, Becker, Durazo, Limón

SENATE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE: 7-0, 8/29/25

AYES: Caballero, Seyarto, Cabaldon, Dahle, Grayson, Richardson, Wahab

ASSEMBLY FLOOR: 79-0, 6/2/25 - See last page for vote

SUBJECT: CalWORKs: family violence option and gender-based violence information

SOURCE: California Partnership to End Domestic Violence
Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations
Western Center on Law & Poverty
Women's Foundation of California, Dr. Beatriz Maria Solis Policy Institute

DIGEST: This bill makes several changes to provisions of the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) Family Violence Option including requiring California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to update the protocols necessary to serve families who are or have been victims of domestic violence, requiring counties to waive CalWORKs program requirements for good cause unless there is documented evidence the applicant does not need the waiver, and requires CDSS and stakeholders to develop statewide standards for determining when there is good cause to issue a waiver.

ANALYSIS:

Existing Law:

- 1) Establishes the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, which permits states to implement the program under a state plan. (42 United States Code (USC) 601 et seq.)
- 2) Establishes an optional program for states, under TANF, commonly known as the Family Violence Option, which requires states to establish standards and procedures to ensure that the state will screen for and identify individuals receiving TANF assistance with a history of domestic violence, refer such individuals to counseling and supportive services, and waive, pursuant to a determination of good cause, program requirements for individuals receiving assistance in cases where compliance with such requirements would make it more difficult for individuals receiving assistance to escape domestic violence or unfairly penalize such individuals who are or have been victimized by such violence, or individuals who are at risk of further domestic violence. (42 USC 602(a)(7))
- 3) Requires certification that the State will provide information to victims of sexual harassment or survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking about assistance under the state program to help them; requires certification that case workers and other agency personnel responsible for administering state programs are trained in the nature and dynamic of these gender-based violence; requires certification that standards and procedures for sexual harassment, sexual assault, and stalking; and requires certification of methods for ascertaining and ensuring confidentiality. (42 USC 602(a)(8))
- 4) Establishes in state law the CalWORKs program, to provide cash assistance and other social services for low-income families through the federal TANF program. Under CalWORKs, each county provides assistance through a combination of state, county, and federal TANF funds. (Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC) 11200 et seq.)
- 5) Establishes CalWORKs Family Violence Option which requires a task force to develop protocols to define domestic abuse, address training standards and curricula, individual case assessments, confidentiality procedures; notice procedures, counseling, and other appropriate participation requirements as an overall plan to transition from welfare-to-work. (WIC 11495 et seq)

- 6) Establishes grounds for welfare-to-work good cause exemption on the basis of domestic violence. (WIC 11320.3(f)(2))

This Bill:

- 1) Clarifies that it is the intent of the Legislature to maximize protections afforded to survivors of domestic violence, sexual harassment, sexual assault, and stalking through the provision of state statute. Deletes the intent that CalWORKs recipients participate in welfare-to-work activities, to the full extent of their abilities, including participation in counselling and treatment programs, as appropriate, to enable the recipient to obtain unsubsidized employment and move towards self-sufficiency.
- 2) Defines “abuse” to include sexual harassment, sexual assault, domestic violence, and stalking.
- 3) Requires CDSS to align the CalWORKs family violence option and gender-based violence provisions with, and not be more restrictive than, the federal requirements and option concerning survivors of abuse provided for in the TANF Family Violence Option (42 U.S.C. Sec. 602(a)(7),(8)), and, to the fullest extent permitted, maximize protections afforded to survivors of abuse.
- 4) Deletes provisions creating a task force and instead requires CDSS to develop protocols on handling cases in which applicants and recipients are past or present victims of abuse.
- 5) Clarifies that CDSS can waive any CalWORKs program requirements for survivors of domestic violence, on a case-by-case basis, for so long as necessary in accordance with process required by this bill.
- 6) Requires CDSS to issue an adequate written notice of action to each applicant or recipient of the determination about whether or not a domestic violence waiver will be issued, and if a waiver is denied, the specific reasons for the denial.
- 7) Requires CDSS to issue regulations for the protocols required to be developed by this bill regarding cases in which applicants and recipients are past or present victims of abuse, on or before January 1, 2027.
- 8) Requires CDSS to issue a timely and adequate notice of action when discontinuing a waiver that includes the reason for termination.

- 9) Deletes provisions that allow counties to waive requirements for people experiencing domestic violence using current protocols until CDSS has issued regulations.
- 10) Requires a county to find good cause for and issue a waiver when compliance with the welfare-to-work program requirement would make it more difficult for an applicant or recipient, or their children, to escape abuse or to stay safe after escaping abuse, or that it would be detrimental or unfairly penalize those applicants or recipients who are or have been victimized by abuse or who are at risk of further domestic abuse.
- 11) Prohibits a county from denying a waiver absent a documented determination that an applicant or recipient could comply with the program requirement without that requirement making it more difficult for them, or their children, to escape abuse, or that the requirement would not be detrimental or unfairly penalize them. Allows a recipient's attestation regarding the impact of compliance shall be sufficient to issue a waiver unless the county determines that statement is not credible due to contradictory statements on other supporting documentation.
- 12) Requires CDSS, in conjunction with counties, advocates, and current or former recipient survivors, to develop statewide standards for determining when there is good cause to issue a waiver.
- 13) Prohibits a county from considering denying a waiver due to participation in domestic violence, mental health, or substance disorder services that contribute to the individual meeting any required participation hours as a basis for denying a waiver; due to a survivor choosing to not receive or participate in services from a victim service provider; nor discontinue a waiver on the basis that a survivor chooses to voluntarily participate in welfare-to-work activities.
- 14) Requires a county to reevaluate a waiver every six months. A county may reevaluate a waiver more frequently based upon the recipient's report of changed circumstances.
- 15) Requires a county to notify each applicant or recipient about whether a waiver will be issued, and if a waiver is denied, the specific reasons for the denial by the time of application approval. A county shall not take any adverse action against a recipient for noncompliance with a program requirement while a waiver request is pending for that program requirement.

- 16) Requires counties to notify for CalWORKs recipients about if a waiver will be terminated and the reasons for the termination. The county shall provide a written timely and adequate notice of action of the termination.
- 17) Notwithstanding the rulemaking provisions of the Administrative Procedure Act, CDSS may implement, interpret, or make specific the provisions of this bill through all- county letters or similar instructions until regulations are adopted.
- 18) Requires all CalWORKs applicants and recipients to be informed verbally and in writing, and to the extent required by law, in the language understood by the applicant or recipient, of the availability of services designed to assist individuals to identify, escape, or stop future domestic abuse as well as to overcome the effects of domestic abuse.
- 19) Requires CDSS, in consultation with stakeholders, including, but not limited to, federally recognized state domestic violence and sexual assault coalitions, other domestic abuse, sexual assault, and sexual harassment advocates, and public benefits advocates, shall develop both of the following:
 - a) A uniform set of written materials to be used statewide that address all relevant information and necessary requirements designed to assist individuals to identify, escape, or stop future abuse, overcome the effects of abuse, and make informed decisions. The statewide information may be provided in one document and must include all of the following information:
 - i. Available domestic abuse, stalking, sexual assault, and sexual harassment resources and victim service providers.
 - ii. How the information of an applicant or recipient abuse survivor is kept confidential and when the county human services agency is legally required to disclose that information.
 - iii. Information on the availability of program waivers, including a specific list of program requirements that may be waived, other program requirements not listed that may be waived, the option to waive other program requirements not listed, how to request a waiver, and a waiver request form.
 - i. Information about safety planning, including the process of identifying risks, mapping out resources, and assessing

options to increase survivor safety developed by specialized workers in partnership with the abuse survivor.

- ii. How the county will tailor a recipient survivor's welfare-to-work plan and CalWORKs support services to meet their needs.
- iii. Information on CalWORKs eligibility for noncitizen abuse survivors, exceptions to immigrant sponsor deeming requirements, and information on applying for legal status for noncitizen abuse survivors.

- b) A standardized waiver request form that allows an applicant or recipient to identify the specific program requirements that they need waived. Requires the form shall include a list of program requirements that may be waived, the ability to request a waiver of a requirement that may not be specifically listed, and a way for an applicant or recipient to indicate whether they are seeking a waiver for a retroactive period of time.
- 20) A county shall safely and confidentially verbally inform of, and provide, in the preferred language identified by the applicant or recipient to the extent required by law, the written materials and standardized waiver request form described in this bill to each applicant and recipient. Each county shall supplement the written materials described in this bill.
- 21) Requires CDSS to automate CalSAWS and provide the written materials and standardized waiver request form described in this bill on BenefitsCal to ensure that technology is fully utilized to ensure that applicants and recipients who are abuse survivors have access to that information and receive the assistance they need, on or before January 1, 2028.
- 22) Requires CDSS, during its update to the Legislature during annual budget hearings on data of the number of identified potential victims of domestic abuse during online CalWORKs appraisals to also include the number of CalWORKs recipients who have been identified as survivors of nondomestic stalking, sexual abuse, and sexual harassment.

Comments

According to the author, "CalWORKs provides cash assistance and benefits to qualified low-income families. Victims of abuse qualify for a waiver of specific program requirements, but the process to getting that waiver is convoluted, causing

many victims to miss out on this waiver. For example, a waiver on the time limit on aid may be available. Survivors of domestic abuse can remain on aid longer than the state and federal maximum time limits if granted an exception or an exemption. AB 969 would remove barriers experienced by survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and stalking when applying for and accessing CalWORKs. Specifically, AB 969 would make changes so that domestic violence waivers are no longer conditional on welfare-to-work program requirements. By making these changes, survivors are empowered to request and receive accommodations for the CalWORKs program requirements. Families that have suffered abuse and qualify for this waiver should not have additional hurdles to deal with when accessing the benefits that they qualify for.”

Domestic Violence. Domestic violence is abuse or threats of abuse when the person being abused and the abuser are in, or have been in, an intimate relationship or when the abused person and the abuser are closely related. It is experienced by all segments of society; however, certain communities are disproportionately affected. During the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, incidents of domestic violence and subsequent calls to help lines increased as people had to stay home due to the public health orders. Of the 695,060 known incidents of intimate partner violence in 2019, only 58 percent were reported to police.

CalWORKs. As the California’s version of the federal TANF program, CalWORKs is the state’s largest anti-poverty program. CalWORKs provides temporary cash assistance aimed at moving children out of poverty and helping qualified low-income families meet their basic needs, such as rent, clothing, utility bills, food, and other items needed to ensure children are cared for at home and safely remain with their families. In addition to cash assistance, adult CalWORKs recipients are provided education, employment, and training services designed to help remove barriers to work and promote self-sufficiency. These services are typically outlined in a welfare-to-work plan. CDSS is the designated state agency responsible for program supervision at the state level, and counties are responsible for administering the program at the local level.

CalWORKs and Survivors of Domestic Violence. Existing state law and regulation allows for the waiver of CalWORKs requirements for survivors of domestic violence. This is allowed because of federal welfare reform legislation in the 1990s that created the optional Family Violence Option program, among a variety of other changes. The goal of the Family Violence Option program was to address the barriers that domestic violence poses within the context of federal aid under TANF. Federal law allows a state to elect to implement a special program within

its TANF program to serve survivors of domestic violence and to waive program requirements for those individuals. Federal law grants states broad federal flexibility to implement program waivers for survivors of domestic violence. California chose to adopt the Family Violence Option provisions while implementing other welfare reforms through AB 1542 (Ducheny, Chapter 270, Statutes of 1997).

In March of 2023, the federal government made changes to the requirements of the Family Violence Option program. The changes include:

- Establish and enforce standards and procedures to inform TANF applicants of state assistance available for survivors of domestic violence, sexual harassment, sexual assault, and stalking.
- Train TANF caseworkers and other agency personnel in: the dynamics of domestic violence, sexual harassment, sexual assault, and stalking; state procedures designed to prevent domestic violence and other forms of gender-based violence and assist survivors; and procedures to ensure the confidentiality of survivors' personal information.
- For the 42 states that have adopted the Family Violence Option, establish and enforce standards and procedures to screen for and identify domestic violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and stalking. States that have adopted the option also must provide TANF applicants and participants with information about the assistance available for survivors.¹

Some of these requirements were already in place in California, but AB 969 changes the statute to require CDSS to update protocols and documents to ensure all survivors have access to the most up-to-date materials.

The CDSS Manual of Policies and Procedures section 42-715.5 provides which CalWORKs program requirements counties can and cannot waive for a recipient who has been identified as a past or present victim of domestic abuse, when good cause has been established. Some specific requirements counties cannot waive include: asset, income, homeless assistance, and deprivation requirements. Counties may waive: paternity establishment, time limit, work, education, and child support requirements. The CDSS Manual of Policies and Procedures also requires counties to develop criteria for waiving requirements and states that

¹ Azevedo-McCaffrey, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2022: "States Should Use New Requirement to Improve TANF for Domestic Violence Survivors" <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/states-should-use-new-requirement-to-improve-tanf-for-domestic-violence-survivors>

counties can establish the duration of welfare-to-work and time limit waivers, as long as the granting of such waivers comply with the state and federal regulations. Current state law permits, but does not require, counties to waive CalWORKs program requirements for recipients that are identified as being survivors of domestic abuse.

Examples of what may constitute good cause for waiving CalWORKs program requirements for survivors of domestic abuse include, but are not limited to:

- The participant is fleeing the abuser and is in temporary housing or is homeless
- The participant has entered a shelter
- The participant is concerned about the safety of their children
- The participant is a party to a restraining order or divorce action against the abuser
- The participant and/or the children are undergoing counseling to cope with the effects of the abuse.

There have been nationwide studies that show the current requirements on domestic violence survivors make obtaining a waiver difficult. One study of domestic violence program staff in 2009 found that “a significant barrier for victims is the requirement to ‘prove’ the violence. Respondents describe TANF staff requiring particular types of documentation, such as hospital records, even if the victim reports she has not been to a hospital. Victims are also asked to produce paperwork that they left behind when escaping violence.” The same study found that “only 14% of respondents rated screening for family violence as working well and only 12% rated notification of the family violence option or other family violence response as working well. Although larger percentages rated screening (42%) and notification (38%) as working ‘OK’, 28% said screening and 33% said notification don’t work.”²

Despite the laws and regulations currently in place, the percentage of families that receive a waiver for domestic abuse are below expectations. Nationwide, “most studies have found that 50 to 60 percent of women participating in TANF have experienced domestic violence at some point in their lives, compared to about 30

² Casey et. al, 2010: “Not Enough: What TANF Offers Family Violence Victims.”
<https://vawnet.org/sites/default/files/materials/files/2016-08/NotEnoughTANF-FVFULLReport.pdf>

percent of all U.S. women.”³ Data from the United States Health and Human Services Agency shows that the 2020 monthly average approval for good cause domestic violence waivers was only 0.7% in the United State and only 105 families in California which was .002%.⁴

This bill requires counties to grant waivers for domestic violence if program requirements would make it difficult for CalWORKs applicants or recipients to escape abuse or stay safe after escaping abuse unless the county can prove that the participant can fulfill a requirement safely. It also requires CDSS in conjunction with counties, advocates, and current or former recipient survivors, to develop statewide standards for determining when there is good cause to issue a waiver, instead of each county deciding their own standard. This bill further requires CDSS and other stakeholders to develop standardized protocols for providing information about the availability of waivers, resources, and other processes for assisting this population.

Related/Prior Legislation:

AB 2277 (Reyes, Chapter 693, Statutes of 2022) required a county to waive a CalWORKs program requirement for a recipient who has been identified as a past or present victim of abuse when it has been determined that good cause exists.

AB 2030 (Limon, Chapter 485, Statutes Of 2018) required the CDSS to include questions that enable an applicant for, or recipient of, public social services or public assistance, including CalWORKs, to disclose a disability, the need for accommodation due to disability, or any experience of domestic violence in any amendment or revision to the standard form for initial applications and the CalWORKs semiannual report form adopted on or after January 1, 2019.

AB 557 (Rubio, Chapter 691, Statutes of 2017) among other changes, requires all CalWORKs applicants and recipients to be informed verbally and in writing, and to the extent required by law, in the language understood by the applicant or recipient, of the availability of services designed to assist individuals to identify, escape, or stop future domestic abuse as well as to deal with the effects of domestic abuse.

³ *ibid*

⁴ Administration for Children and Families, 2021: “[TANF] Families with a Domestic Violence Exemption, Monthly Average, Fiscal Year 2020.”

FISCAL EFFECT: Appropriation: No Fiscal Com.: Yes Local: Yes
According to the Senate Appropriations Committee, unknown ongoing General Fund costs due to an increase in months of benefits provided. Unknown General Fund costs for automation. No fiscal impact to the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) for state administration.

Unknown costs to counties for administration. Cost to counties would be potentially reimbursable by the state, subject to a determination by the Commission on State Mandates.

SUPPORT: (Verified 8/29/25)

California Partnership to End Domestic Violence (source)
Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations (source)
Western Center on Law & Poverty (source)
Women's Foundation of California, Dr. Beatriz Maria Solis Policy Institute (source)
American Association of University Women - California
Black Women for Wellness Action Project
California Latinas for Reproductive Justice
California Women's Law Center
Child Care Law Center
El Concilio California
Ella Baker Center for Human Rights
End Child Poverty CA
Glide
Golden State Opportunity
Justice2jobs Coalition
LA Defensa
Legal Aid At Work
Messaging for Success
Nasw California
Prevail
Public Health Advocates
Seiu California
Tahirih Justice Center
The Sidewalk Project
The University Corporation Dba Strength United
United Way of San Joaquin County
Valor US

OPPOSITION: (Verified 8/29/25)

None received

ASSEMBLY FLOOR: 79-0, 6/2/25

AYES: Addis, Aguiar-Curry, Ahrens, Alanis, Alvarez, Arambula, Ávila Farías, Bains, Bauer-Kahan, Bennett, Berman, Boerner, Bonta, Bryan, Calderon, Caloza, Carrillo, Castillo, Chen, Connolly, Davies, DeMaio, Dixon, Elhawary, Ellis, Flora, Fong, Gabriel, Gallagher, Garcia, Gipson, Jeff Gonzalez, Mark González, Hadwick, Haney, Harabedian, Hart, Hoover, Irwin, Jackson, Kalra, Krell, Lackey, Lee, Lowenthal, Macedo, McKinnor, Muratsuchi, Nguyen, Ortega, Pacheco, Papan, Patel, Patterson, Pellerin, Petrie-Norris, Quirk-Silva, Ramos, Ransom, Celeste Rodriguez, Michelle Rodriguez, Rogers, Blanca Rubio, Sanchez, Schiavo, Schultz, Sharp-Collins, Solache, Soria, Stefani, Ta, Tangipa, Valencia, Wallis, Ward, Wicks, Wilson, Zbur, Rivas

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