

# Oakland Tribune

## New welfare rules let recipients stay in school, get checks

Californians can now pursue education without being penalized

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**Wednesday, December 01, 2004** - Haimanot Hailemariam is a single mom from Hayward who is laying the groundwork for what she hopes will be a career as a licensed vocational nurse and an escape from welfare.

She's taking prerequisite classes at Laney College in Oakland and studying English as a second language.

In the past, she'd have been allowed to study for 18 to 24 months -- just enough time to learn English -- and be faced with a choice: quit school for 32 to 35 hours a week of welfare program-required work or stay in school and take sanctions that would slash her monthly welfare check and bar her from receiving transportation, child care and other supportive services.

But starting today, Hailemariam and others like her may benefit from new rules allowing California's welfare recipients to stay in school for all of the five years they are allowed to receive welfare checks.

"I am so lucky. It's the right time I got in," Hailemariam said during an interview at Laney.

The new rules allow those who get the approval from the welfare department to pursue education or training to do so, full time, for 12 months. After that, they can go to school part time and must work part time, with the hours depending on their course of study and county policy.

The rules could make it harder for some welfare recipients enrolled in vocational programs, which often run between one and two years, county welfare officials said. But they may also provide additional options to recipients pursuing a longer-term education.

In the past, Alameda County's welfare workers weren't able to encourage their clients to pursue degrees in high-demand fields, such as nursing and teaching, because they are five-year programs, said Andrea Ford, policy director of the county's Social Services Agency. Now, county officials are figuring out what the new parameters will be.

"This means mothers, parents on public assistance, can pursue education and training in demand occupations, training that will pay them a living wage," said Diana Spatz, executive director of LIFETIME, an Oakland-based nonprofit that advocates for welfare recipients seeking an education.

State officials in charge of handing down the new rules said they focus welfare recipients on both work and education.

"It gives clients the opportunity to test the labor market while they're still in school," said Charr Lee Metsker, the state Department of Social Services' acting deputy director of welfare to work. "They get their first, and in some cases, second and third jobs while still on aid, and they can move up in their wage progression."

The number of people given the green light to start school may not change, Spatz and others said. Just 18,000 of the state's 227,000 welfare recipients with a work plan are getting training or education, state officials said.

But those who start an educational program often need more than 18 to 24 months to finish it, they said.

The changes could be a boon to the students Irina Rivkin counsels at Laney College. Many need to take English or basic skills classes before they can pursue a course of study, and others need to take prerequisites before they can pursue such programs as nursing, said Rivkin, a welfare program counselor at the school.

Those who have hit their five-year time limit for welfare won't be helped, Rivkin said. But others who may have simply run out of time to take classes under the old system may get a second chance, she said, adding that current or potential students should check in with the school and their welfare counselors as soon as possible, before it's too late to enroll for the spring

semester.

Welfare recipients are better able to take care of their families without assistance if they get an education, their advocates said.

For example, starting pay for a registered nurse can be more than \$40,000 a year, Rivkin said. The average earnings for someone leaving welfare are \$8.78 an hour in California, according to a survey from RAND Corp.

Hailemariam said she's grateful for her chance to go to school and that she'll find a way to mix work into the equation when the time comes.

"I think I can work that out," she said.

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