

COVID-19 Response

Washington State Department of Social and Health Services
Economic Services Administration
Community Services Division

With the first COVID-19 case in the United States confirmed in late January 2020, Washington state became a focal point of the health crisis impacting communities around the globe. Restrictions put in place to protect the health and safety of individuals and communities across the state required many businesses to temporarily close. Public and private sectors had to redesign how they delivered essential services. These changes resulted in immediate, substantial increases in unemployment, and many of our fellow Washingtonians turned to public assistance programs to help weather the storm.

In order to meet the increased demand and ensure individuals and families maintained access to vital supports, the Department of Social and Health Services' Economic Services Administration rapidly implemented a number of operational, program and policy changes.

Operational Changes

- At the direction of the Governor's Office, ESA closed local offices in March 2020 to protect clients and staff. Most staff quickly deployed to telework, and most business continues to be conducted remotely to this day. Clients are able to access benefits online and on the phone.
- This massive shift to remote work occurred at the same time there were unprecedented increases in applications for ESA programs. After an initial spike in wait times during the transition to telework, telephone wait times have remained at reasonably low levels due to deploying all eligibility staff to phones.

Program and Policy Changes

- DSHS activated the Disaster Cash Assistance Program in April 2020. DCAP was available to all Washington households who met the income and resource limits of the program and who were not eligible for other cash programs.
- Pandemic EBT food benefits were made available to families with children who were eligible for free or reduced-price meals through the National School Lunch Program, but were unable to access nutritious foods due to school closures.
- Basic Food households received the maximum allotment for their household size, regardless of their income and deductions. The average household with an increase received an additional \$215 per month.
- ESA extended certification periods for households with eligibility and mid-certification reviews due in the months of April, May and June 2020 in order to ensure individuals and families maintained access to foundational supports.
- Basic Food recipients who are considered Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents and WorkFirst participants received good cause exemptions from mandatory work participation requirements.

- In April 2020 DSHS expanded the criteria for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families 60-month time limit extensions; families who exhausted 60 months on TANF cash assistance and experienced hardships due to COVID-19 were not terminated from or denied benefits. As a result of these expanded criteria, nearly 2,000 families were able to continue receiving TANF or return to the program.
- Beginning in March 2020, DSHS suspended WorkFirst sanction reduction and termination penalties for failure to meet mandatory work participation requirements. Home visits for sanctions and Teen Living Assessments were also eliminated in order to protect the health and safety of clients and staff.
- In October 2020, DSHS partnered with the Legal Foundation of Washington and a cohort of community-based organizations to establish the Washington COVID-19 Immigrant Relief Fund. This fund distributes a one-time cash grant of \$1,000 to Washington residents who are ineligible for other federal stimulus or unemployment benefits due to their immigration status. By the end of January 2021, the Immigrant Relief Fund will have disbursed \$60,100,000 in grants to individuals in need across the state.

Disproportionate Impacts

Crucially, some communities have been **disproportionately affected** by the dual public health and economic crises. ESA programs have played a key role in helping to address increased need and mitigate the disproportionate impact of the pandemic.

- Hispanic and Latino Washingtonians are a larger share of those who began receiving assistance during the pandemic, compared to those who were already receiving assistance.
- Black and African American Washingtonians are a slightly larger percentage of pandemic-era Basic Food clients, and the same is true for Asian and Pacific Islander TANF clients.

More information:

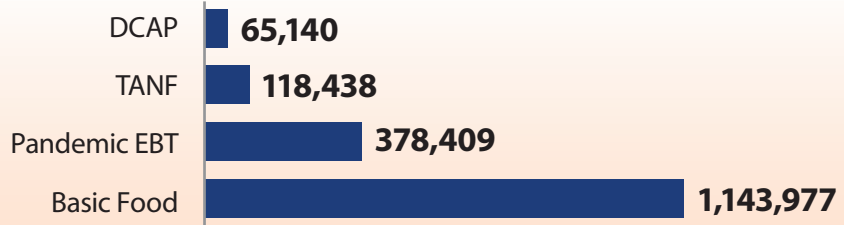
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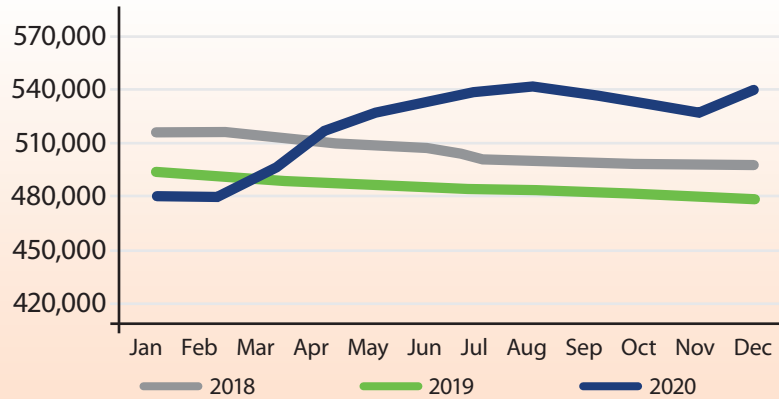
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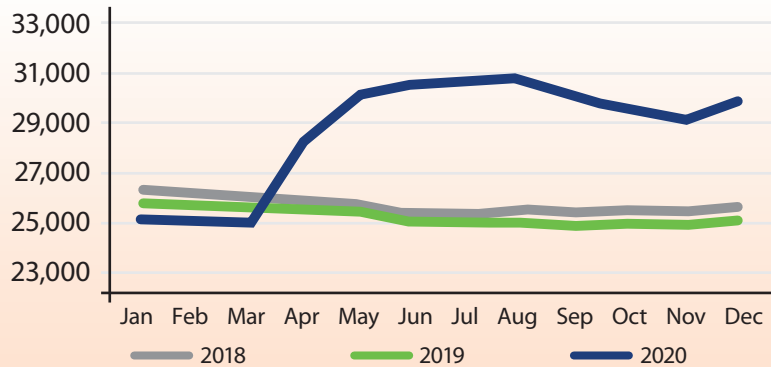
Over 1 million Washingtonians received cash and food assistance between March and December 2020.



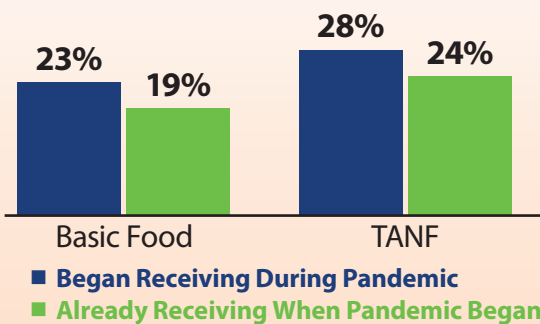
Basic Food cases rose rapidly at the beginning of the pandemic, peaking at 541,154 in August. After declining through the fall, caseloads began to rise again in December. The 538,872 cases in December 2020 represent a 14% increase over the previous December.



TANF cases skyrocketed through the summer, reaching 31,372 in August. Compared to the previous August, that's a 26% increase. TANF cases decreased through the fall, then began to increase again in December.



In both Basic Food and TANF, the percentage of August 2020 clients who are Hispanic or Latino is higher among those who began receiving assistance during the pandemic.



Compared to 2019, there was a 27% increase in TANF applications and a 46% increase in Basic Food applications (which includes P-EBT applications) in 2020. While there were fewer than 1,000 applications for DCAP and the Consolidated Emergency Assistance Program in 2019, there were 96,725 in 2020.

