

Emergency cash and food help

Author

Northwest Justice Project

Last Review Date

October 20, 2025

If you have an emergency and need cash help, Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) has some cash assistance programs you might be eligible for.

1. Emergency cash help

If you have very low income, you might face an emergency that requires financial help right away. For example, you might need help making the next month's rent or paying your utility bill after losing a job. If this happens to you, you can apply to DSHS (<https://www.washingtonconnection.org/home/>) to find out if you're eligible for one of their emergency cash programs. You could be eligible for an emergency cash program even if you already get public benefits.

If you get Temporary Assistance to Needy Families

(<https://www.dshs.wa.gov/esa/community-services-offices/temporary-assistance-needy-families>), you might be eligible to get extra emergency money under either the Additional Requirements (AR) or Diversion Cash Assistance (DCA) programs (<https://www.dshs.wa.gov/esa/community-services-offices/emergency-resources>).

If you get TANF, you can generally get up to \$750 in AR one time a year. DSHS will pay the money directly to the third party you owe, for example the landlord or the utility company.

If you qualify to get TANF, you can get up to \$1,250 in DCA once a year instead of getting TANF. But don't apply for DCA if you think you may have to apply for TANF in the next year. If you end up getting TANF, you'll have to pay back part of the DCA. You'll get a lot more TANF in a year than you would a one-time DCA payment.

Example: Your family of 3 chose to get \$1,250 in DCA. Nine months later, you apply for TANF. You must repay \$312. DSHS will collect this \$312 by lowering your monthly TANF amount by 5% until the \$312 is paid back. If you'd chosen to get TANF instead, you could have gotten \$654 a month for the entire year, for a total of \$7,848.

Talk to a DSHS caseworker about which option makes more sense for you.

If you don't qualify to get TANF, for example because you didn't take part in the WorkFirst program, you may still be eligible for help for one month a year through the CEAP program (<https://www.dshs.wa.gov/esa/emergency-assistance-programs/consolidated-emergency-assistance-program-ceap>).

2. Emergency food stamps

You might be able to get food stamps right away (called **expedited food assistance**) if you live in Washington State and either of these describes your situation:

- Your income for the month is \$150 or less, and you have limited cash available to you
- Your income and available cash aren't enough to pay your rent or mortgage and utilities

If you do agricultural work, there may be different eligibility requirements for you.

How much expedited food assistance you can get will depend on your income and any expenses you have, such as housing and medical. DSHS doesn't count all types of income when deciding if you're eligible (<https://apps.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=388-450-0015>). For example, they don't count tax refunds and some child support payments.

All legal immigrants in Washington state are eligible for expedited food assistance if you also meet income requirements.

3. Disaster assistance

If you live in an area the Governor has declared a disaster, you suffered losses to income or property because of the disaster, and you can't live in or go back to your home because of the disaster, you should apply for disaster assistance (DCAP). (<https://www.dshs.wa.gov/esa/emergency-assistance-programs/disaster-cash-assistance-program>) If DSHS decides that you're eligible to get DCAP, you can get up to 30 days in a row of cash assistance to use for food, shelter, and other necessities.

If the President or Governor has declared an emergency or disaster where **you live**, you may also be eligible for the disaster food stamp program (<https://www.usa.gov/disaster-food-help>).

4. Apply

There are different ways to apply for these emergency assistance programs.

- You can **call** 877-501-2233
- You can apply online at [washingtonconnection.org](https://www.washingtonconnection.org/home/) (<https://www.washingtonconnection.org/home/>).
- You may also be able to apply in person at your local Community Services Office (CSO) (<http://www.dshs.wa.gov/office-locations>). When you get to the office, ask for an application for emergency cash and food stamps. You have the right to file a written application. If you go to apply in-person, they shouldn't turn you away at the front desk without letting you file an application.

If you have a disability, DSHS can help you apply.

5. Appeals

With all these programs, if you're denied or don't get as much assistance as you need, you can fight (appeal) DSHS' decision to deny you assistance or give you a lower amount.

WashingtonLawHelp.org gives general information. It is not legal advice. Find organizations that provide free legal help on our Get legal help page.