

NEW WORK EXEMPTIONS IN MARYLAND'S TEMPORARY CASH ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

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Letitia Logan Passarella

The U.S. Congress has largely avoided major policy changes to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program since its inception in 1996 (Falk, 2024). Notable exceptions include the 2005 Deficit Reduction Act, which tightened work participation rules and revised how caseload reductions are determined for performance metrics. Similarly, the Fiscal Responsibility Act (FRA) of 2023 again adjusted the formula for caseload reductions and introduced additional work outcome measures.

Despite limited federal changes, states have broad discretion in operating their TANF programs and can update program policies to restrict access or enhance the program. Maryland's TANF program, known as Temporary Cash Assistance (TCA), has seen a flurry of policy changes in recent years, mostly driven by strong advocacy to enrich participant outcomes. For example, in July 2019, Maryland began passing through a portion of child support payments to TCA families (Family Investment Administration [FIA], 2019a); additionally, the state introduced Transitional Support Services to address the benefit cliff (FIA, 2019b). In July 2020, adults were permitted to participate in vocational education activities for 2 years, an increase from the federal maximum of 1 year (FIA, 2020a). TCA families also began receiving an additional monthly benefit of \$45 per recipient in September 2022 (FIA, 2022b).

This is one of three briefs on four new TCA policies implemented in calendar years 2021 or 2022. These briefs will detail the percentage of the caseload impacted by the following policies:

- (1) the shift from full-family work and child support sanctions to partial sanctions;
- (2) a work exemption for adult recipients during their first 6 months of TCA benefits;
- (3) an expanded work exemption for single parents with a child under age 1; and
- (4) limitations on the use of work experience and community service to meet work requirements.

This brief examines TCA families who received a **work activity exemption as a new recipient or the expanded work exemption for single parents of a child under age 1** and aims to highlight the impact of this recent TCA policy change on Maryland families.

KEY FINDINGS

- Few cases had a work exemption for a new recipient (5%) or for the state child under 1 exemption (0.3%).

During the 6 months after the work exemption ended:

- Sanctions were not common. Less than 10% of new recipients had a work (7%) or child support (3%) sanction. Few single parents with a child under age 1 exemption had a work (4%) or child support (5%) sanction.
- About three in 10 adults in both exemption groups participated in a work-related activity. Employment was the most common activity.
- About half of both exemption groups had a case closure.
- Income over the eligibility limit was the most common reason for closure among new recipients.
- Did not maintain eligibility and did not recertify for benefits were the most common closure reasons for families with the child under 1 exemption.

Data and Study Population

Data Sources

Program participation data, including sanction status, were extracted from the Eligibility and Enrollment (E&E) system and its predecessor, the Client Automated Resources and Eligibility System (CARES). E&E and CARES are the administrative data systems for safety net programs managed by the Maryland Department of Human Services (MDHS). CARES was operational between March 1998 and November 2021; the migration to E&E was fully completed in November 2021.¹ Both systems provide individual- and case-level participation data for the TCA program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and other services as well as demographic data on participants.

Information on the types of work activities assigned to and completed by participants is provided by the Work Opportunities Record Keeping System (WORKS) system, which was developed in December 2006 by MDHS to collect and report data related to federal work participation reporting requirements, provide MDHS with information that can be used to monitor the results of local work programs, and provide local staff with information to manage and improve program operations.

Study Population

The study population includes every family who received TCA for at least 1 month in State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2023 (July 2022 to June 2023). There were 27,973 families who received at least 1 month of TCA in SFY 2023 including 24,429 adult recipients. From this caseload, we identified the cases that received a work exemption for an adult who was a new recipient (n=1,454) or received the expanded state exemption for a single parent with a child under the age of 1 (n=78).² Follow-up data for these families is extended through June 2024.

Data Analysis

This report utilizes descriptive statistics to describe cases and adult recipients who participated in TCA, including percentages, medians, and averages. The average represents the total (e.g., all earnings) divided by the number of individuals included in the analysis. Median is sometimes a preferred representation of the data. The median is derived by arranging all values from lowest to highest and selecting the midpoint value. Extreme values can sometimes skew averages, but they do not affect the median. This report examines population statistics and therefore does not include inferential statistics which are used to generalize sample findings to the population.

¹ The transition to E&E resulted in some data inaccuracies. When we were able to identify data inaccuracies, we excluded analyses. Given the transition to a new data system, there may be additional unknown data issues.

² There were three cases that received both exemptions during SFY 2023.

Background on Work Exemptions

NEW EXEMPTION POLICIES

Effective October 2022, MDHS implemented two new work activity exemption policies:

New Recipients/Cases

Adults who are new TCA recipients are *exempt from work activity requirements during their first 6 months* of TCA benefit receipt. TANF benefits received in Maryland or any other state count toward the 6 exempted months. This policy is intended to provide individuals with the time necessary to stabilize crises or barriers that brought them onto the program.

Child Under 1 State Exemption

Single-parent families are exempt from work activity requirements when they have a child under age 1 through both federal and Maryland state policy. While the federal policy has a lifetime limit of 12 months per family, *the new state policy exempts single-parent families from work activity requirements for each child until their first birthday*. The federal exemption must first be exhausted before the state exemption is applied.

(FIA, 2022a)

To encourage employment, adult TANF recipients must participate in work-related activities designed to support their transitions to employment (Ensuring that Recipients Work, 1999). Specifically, states must require participation once they have “determined that the individual is ready to engage in work or when he or she has received assistance for a total of 24 months.” Further, states must meet work participation goals for engaging adult recipients in work activities for a specified number of hours or face a financial penalty.

Most adult recipients in Maryland’s TCA program are required to engage in work-related activities within 30 days of their approval for TCA benefits (FIA, 2021).³ Failure to participate can result in a work sanction, leading to reduced monthly benefits.⁴ In October 2022, Maryland implemented two new exemptions from this requirement: (a) for adults who are new to the TCA program and (b) for single adults with a child under the age of 1.

With the passage of House Bill 1043 (2022), new adult recipients in Maryland’s TCA program became exempt from the requirement to engage in activities within 30 days of application approval. New adult recipients are those who have not received 6 months of TANF benefits in Maryland or another state. These recipients do not have to participate in any work-related activities during the first 6 months of their TCA receipt.

³ Prior to December 2021, Maryland had a universal engagement policy that required eligible adult recipients to participate in a work-related activity before local offices approved their TCA applications (FIA, 2021).

⁴ See [Partial Sanctions in Maryland’s Temporary Cash Assistance Program](#) for more information on work sanctions.

House Bill 1043 (2022) also provided a work activity exemption for single parents with a child under age 1. This new exemption supplements the federal version, which has a maximum time limit of 12 months (Ensuring that Recipients Work, 1999). These months can be used for a single child or across multiple children, but only 12 months are allowed. Maryland's new exemption, however, extends this exemption for each child under the age of 1 after the parent has exhausted their 12 months under the federal exemption.

Advocates cited these two exemptions as a trauma-informed practice that allows adults to address any life-changing event or crisis—a new baby, homelessness, domestic violence, loss of a job, among others—that brought them onto the program (Testimony in Support of House Bill 1043, 2022; Support – HB 1043, 2022; Maryland Families, 2022). Early research highlighted that many TANF recipients have multiple barriers to employment (Bloom et al., 2011), and as a result, TANF programs aim to address those barriers through support services, education, and employment assistance (Rodrigue et al., 2022; Waters et al., 2024). To that end, the goal of these two new exemptions is to allow families to take advantage of supportive services, to gain stability during the exempted months, and additionally for those with a new baby, to be involved during a critical period of child development. After the exemption ends, the expectation is that adults will be in a better position to reenter the workforce or to obtain skills or credentials that facilitate employment.

These exemptions are beyond the allowances of federal regulations, however. This means that the adult recipients are still counted in the state's work participation goals during the exempted months (FIA, 2022c). In their own testimony, MDHS (Letter of Concern, 2022) emphasized how these exemptions could negatively impact Maryland's ability to meet federal performance goals. Given Maryland's reduced goals, however, this may not be a concern. Since federal fiscal year 2016, Maryland's work participation goal has not exceeded 15% (Office of Family Assistance, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024).⁵

Work Exemptions among the SFY 2023 Caseload

The recent exemption policy for adults who are new TCA recipients and for those who have children under age 1 became effective in October 2022, during SFY 2023. Few cases received these exemptions during the year, as shown in Figure 1. Only 5% of cases had a new adult recipient who was exempted from participating in a work-related activity. This is less than the 16% of cases that were identified as new to TCA in Maryland during SFY 2023 (Smith et al., 2024). There may be a few reasons the percentage of cases that received the exemption was lower than the percentage that were new. First, this policy went into effect 4 months into the SFY, and some new recipients may have begun their TCA receipt in the months preceding the October 2022 effective date. These recipients may not benefit from the new exemption. Second, any recipients who received more than 6 months in another state's TANF

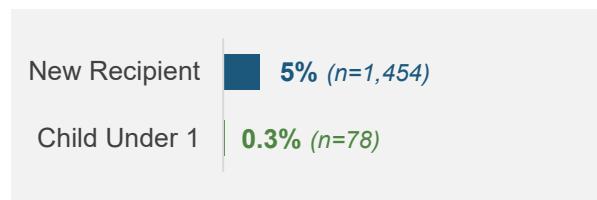
⁵ Since the passage of House Bill 1043, federal legislation under the Fiscal Responsibility Act (2023)

mandated a revised calculation for work participation goals that may increase states' goals.

program would be ineligible for this work exemption. Last, there may be a delay in implementation as case managers learn the new policy.

Less than 1% of cases had the state version of the child under 1 exemption. This exemption may be particularly low because there must be a child under the age of 1 in a single-parent household. While the majority of SFY 2023 cases had a single adult recipient, only 10% of the caseload had a child under the age of 1 (Smith et al., 2024). Some families may still have months of their federal child under 1 exemption which must be exhausted before the state exemption applies; only 2% of cases received the federal exemption in SFY 2023 (Schuyler et al., 2024). The small percentage with a child under 1 exemption may also be explained by families receiving a different work exemption (e.g. due to a long-term disability or caring for a disabled household member), families may not be eligible (e.g. there are no adult or multiple adult recipients on the case), the adults may choose to work, or an eligible family did not receive the exemption.

Figure 1. Percent of Cases with a State Work Exemption in SFY 2023



The number of consecutive months in which families were exempted from work requirements adheres to the state's policy. Specifically, new adult recipients were

exempted from work requirements for a median of 6 consecutive months.⁶ Families with a child under age 1 received the state exemption for a median of 11 months.

For the child under 1 exemption, the median is just under the 12-month maximum allowed for each child, likely due to families transitioning from the federal to state exemption. Previous research found that adults receiving the federal child under 1 exemption only used a median of 7 exempted months (Hall, 2016), indicating that they may have additional federal months to exhaust before receiving the state exemption.

On the other hand, some parents may decide to participate in a work-related activity before their child reaches their first birthday; these cases would no longer receive the work exemption during any eligible months in which they participated in an activity. Some may transition to work and no longer receive TCA benefits. Previous research found that nearly three in every five adults with the federal exemption worked after leaving the TCA program (Hall, 2016).

Consecutive Months with a Work Exemption

Cases with new adult recipients received a median of **6 consecutive months** with the work exemption.

Cases with a child under 1 received a median of **11 consecutive months** with the work exemption.

⁶ Consecutive months are calculated from the beginning of the exemption status through the end

date of the exemption or June 2024, whichever occurs first.

Short-term Outcomes after the Expiration of the Work Exemption

The next set of analyses explore three potential outcomes during the 6 months after the work exemption ended. These outcomes include: (a) families received a work or child support sanction; (b) adults participated in a work-related activity or have been identified as having a barrier to participation; or (c) the families' cases closed. It is rare for families to experience all three of these outcomes during the 6 months after the work activity exemption ended. Hence, these analyses explore each outcome independently.

OUTCOMES AFTER THE WORK EXEMPTION

The next set of analyses examine outcomes in the 6 months after the exemption ended through June 2024. Only cases that have at least 6 months between the exemption end date and June 2024 are included in these analyses.

- For new cases, 1,432 of the 1,454 cases (98%) have at least 6 months of follow-up data.
- For child under 1 exemptions, 56 of the 78 cases (72%) have at least 6 months of follow-up data.

Conciliations or Sanctions

To help adults obtain employment, federal law mandates that states require most adult recipients to participate in work-related activities such as job search, vocational education, or work experience (Ensuring that Recipients Work, 1999). Adhering to federal law, Maryland requires most single

adults to participate in work-related activities for at least 30 hours per week; those with a child under the age of 6 years must participate for 20 hours per week (FIA, 2022c).⁷ Therefore, once the work exemption ended for these families, the adults were required to participate in a work-related activity.

Families with either of the work exemptions were required to cooperate with child support requirements throughout the use of their work exemptions. Cooperation with the public child support program means taking steps to establish a child support case and order. Families must also assign to the state their rights to any support paid while they are receiving TANF. States share these child support payments with the federal government to recoup the costs of TANF benefits. In lieu of full recoupment, some states, including Maryland, pass through some child support to families receiving TANF benefits (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2023), and importantly, child support is a boost to families' incomes, especially among those in deep poverty (Smith & Hall, 2021; Cancian et al, 2024).

Unless families have another exemption or good cause reason, non-compliance with requirements to participate in work-related activities or cooperate with the child support program results in a financial penalty commonly known as a sanction. When sanctioned, families' TCA benefits are partially reduced⁸ until they comply with

⁷ Two-adult households must participate in work-related activities for a combined minimum of 35 hours per week or for 55 hours per week if they receive a Child Care Scholarship for daycare (FIA, 2022c).

⁸ These partial sanctions went into effect in December 2021 for child support sanctions and January 2022 for work sanctions (FIA, 2021). Previously, full-family

sanctions were implemented for non-compliance; this meant that cases closed and all TCA benefits ended until families complied with requirements. Prior to the implementation of partial sanctions, full-family sanctions were largely phased out beginning in March 2020 when Maryland suspended work requirements

requirements or a good cause reason is identified. For a work sanction, the *adult portion* of the TCA benefit is reduced by 30% (FIA, 2021). For child support sanctions, the *entire grant* amount is reduced by 25%. Each time customers are not compliant with work or child support requirements, case managers must provide customers with a 30-day conciliation period. This allows the customer to either come into compliance before the financial penalty is imposed or to provide a good cause reason for non-compliance.

For new adult TCA recipients, just over one in 10 (11%) received at least one conciliation period during the 6 months after this work exemption ended (Figure 2). This means the adults were not participating in a work activity or cooperating with child support requirements. After the conciliation period, 7% of families subsequently received a work sanction and 3% received a child support sanction. The percentage who

were sanctioned is comparable to the percentage of all SFY 2023 recipients.⁹

For single parents who had children under age 1, only 7% received a conciliation period during the 6 months after the work exemption ended. Subsequent to the conciliation period, 4% received a work sanction and 5% received a child support sanction. Compared to all SFY 2023 recipients, families with a child under 1 exemption were slightly more likely to have a child support sanction (5% vs. 3%). Given the young age of children on these cases, it may be more likely for those children to still require a child support order. Relatedly, some TCA families require more than 1 year to establish child support orders (Demyan & Passarella, 2017), likely due to the lengthy process requiring cooperation at multiple steps. As a result, parents and caregivers may be found uncooperative if they do not comply with each step of the process.

Figure 2. Conciliation and Sanction Status
During the 6 months after exemption end date

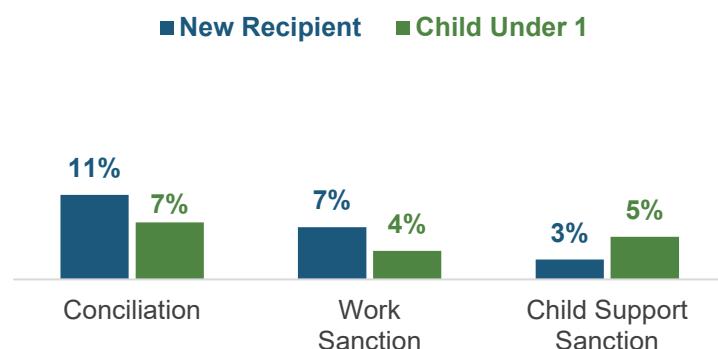


Figure 2 Interpretation example:
Among the 1,432 cases in SFY 2023 with a new recipient work exemption, 11% had a 30-day conciliation during the 6 months after the new exemption ended; additionally, 7% had a work sanction and 3% had a child support sanction during those 6 months after the work exemption ended.

due to the COVID-19 pandemic; when sanctions were reinstated, many families still qualified for a good cause exemption due to continued pandemic-related closures and illness (Zimmerman, 2021).

⁹ Among all SFY 2023 cases, 6% had a work sanction and 3% had a child support sanction (Passarella, 2025).

Participation in Work-related Activities or Assignment to Barrier Codes

Since most adult recipients are required to participate in a work-related activity, another outcome during the 6 months after adults no longer had a work exemption is participation in a work-related activity, assuming they are not eligible for another exemption.

Alternatively, adults may identify a barrier that prohibits their participation in an activity. Figure 3 provides information about participation in work activities or assignment to barrier codes.

The goal of the two new work exemptions is to provide families with extended time to address any issues that may have brought them onto the program, such as a health issue, recent loss of employment, housing instability, or caring for a new baby. The aim is to have families in a more stable position to actively participate in work activities that are designed to facilitate employment.

During the 6 months after either of the work exemptions ended, about 30% of families in each exemption group had an adult who participated in work-related activities. Given the expectation of participation after the work exemption ended, this percentage may seem low; however, this is consistent with participation among all adult recipients in SFY 2023 (Schuyler et al., 2024).

Among those who did participate in a work-related activity, employment was a common activity, as shown in Figure 4. Of those in an activity, 70% with a new recipient exemption and more than half (53%) with a child under 1 exemption were employed at some point during the 6-month follow-up period. Some adults may be demonstrating their readiness for employment by participating in job search activities. One quarter (27%) of new recipients and half (47%) of adults on

child under age 1 cases were completing job search activities. Participation in these two activities, employment in particular, may point to the stability that these adults secured.

Some adults, however, had other barriers that may have prevented their participation in a work-related activity (Figure 3). Few (5%) of the new recipients were identified as having any such barriers, but more than one in 10 (13%) adults with the recently expired child under 1 exemption did have additional barriers to employment. These barriers can range from child care and transportation challenges to domestic violence or disabilities. Notably, a child care barrier was more commonly documented among families with a barrier who had a recently expired child under 1 exemption (data not shown). Despite Maryland's Child Care Scholarship which allows families, particularly low-income families, to obtain child care services at a free or reduced cost, access to child care has become increasingly more difficult in Maryland as many providers have closed since the pandemic (Comptroller of Maryland, 2024; Winebrenner & Shaughnessy, 2024).

Figure 3. Participation in Work-related Activities or Assignment to Barrier Codes
During the 6 months after exemption end date

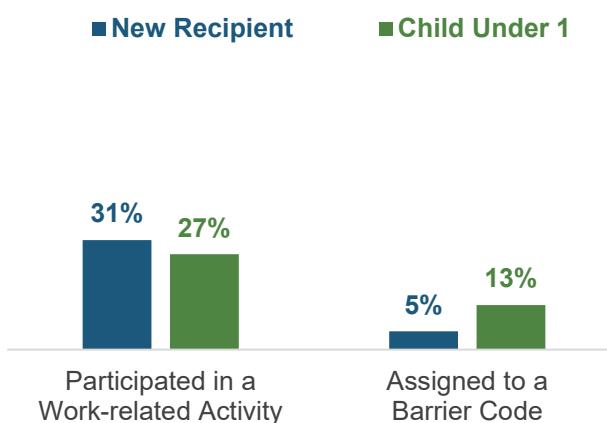
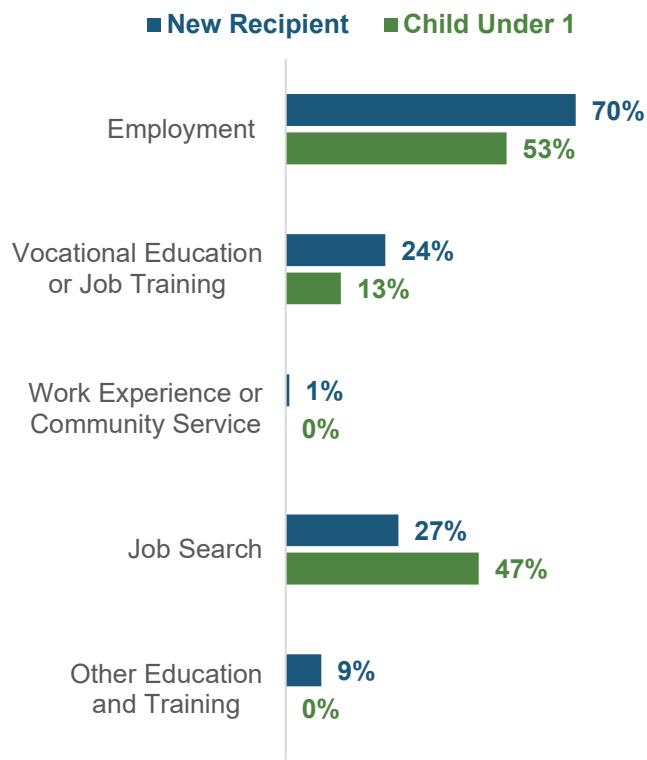


Figure 4. Participation in Work-related Activities
During the 6 months after exemption end date



Note: Includes adults who participated in a work-related activity (see Figure 3). Adults may participate in multiple activities throughout the 6-month follow-up period so percentages may not sum to 100%.

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTIONS

Employment: unsubsidized or subsidized jobs

Vocational education or job training: education program, on-the-job training, self-employment training

Work experience or community service: unpaid placements designed to prepare participants for employment

Job search: resume development, job applications, and interviews

Other education and training: secondary education/GED, adult basic education, English as a second language, job skills training

Case Closure

Case closure is the final outcome examined in this brief, and it is a common outcome. About half of families whose exemption ended as a new recipient (51%) or as a single parent to a child under age 1 (48%) had a case closure during the 6-month follow-up period (Figure 5). If these case closures occurred early in the follow-up period, then the case closure could be a reason that participation in work-related activities was not higher.

Case closure can indicate a positive outcome if the closure was due to employment. Nearly half (46%) of closures among new recipients were due to income that was higher than the eligibility threshold. Employment may have been more difficult for single parents with a young child, as only one in five (19%) closed for income over the limit. This may not be particularly surprising, given that single parents require child care in order to work, and child care has become increasingly difficult to secure and afford in recent years (Comptroller of Maryland, 2024; Winebrenner & Shaughnessy, 2024).

Case closures may also indicate that the family is having difficulty continuing benefits although they may still qualify. More than half of cases whose child under 1 exemption ended closed either because they did not maintain eligibility (30%) or they did not reapply for benefits (22%) (Figure 6). A description of these and other case closure reasons can be found on p. 10. Maintaining eligibility requires families to submit requested information or to comply with their Family Independence Plan. Families are also required to periodically recertify their eligibility for TCA and if they do not provide all documentation to recertify benefits or miss redetermination

appointments, then their cases can be closed. These two reasons are common among cases that return quickly to the program after a case closure (Hall & Passarella, 2020) indicating that these families may still have difficulty with stability and did not intend to end their TCA benefit receipt. Alternatively, these families may have chosen not to reapply if they had begun working without informing the TCA agency. These administrative reasons were less likely among the new recipients, however. One third of new recipient cases closed either for not maintaining eligibility (24%) or for not reapplying during recertification (10%).

Figure 5. Percentage of Cases that Closed
During the 6 months after exemption end date

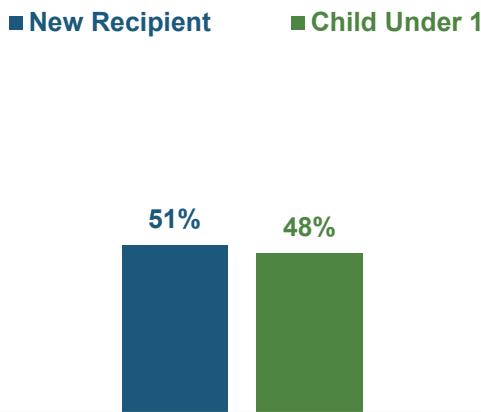
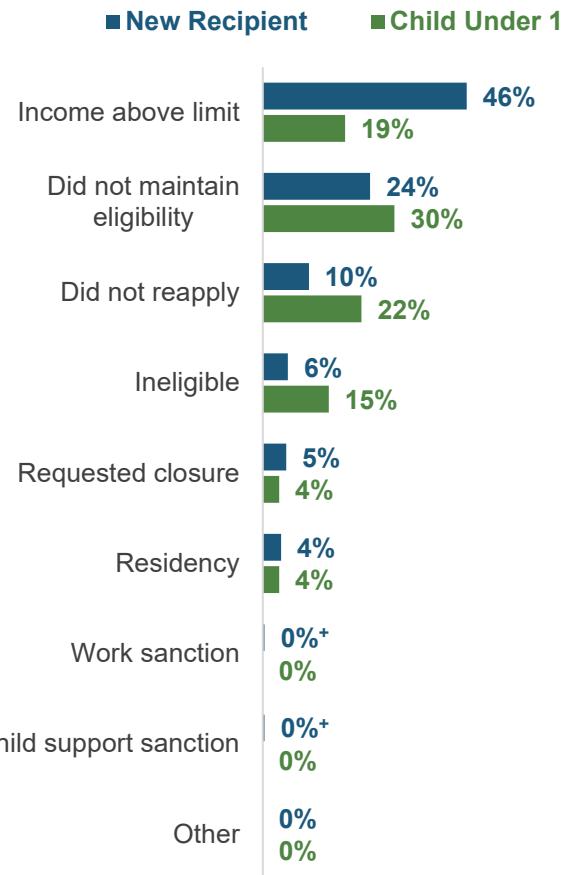


Figure 6. Case Closure Reasons
During the 6 months after exemption end date



Note: Cases can close for multiple reasons; as a result, percentages may not sum to 100%.

*Values under 0.1% are rounded to 0%.

CASE CLOSURE DESCRIPTIONS

Income above limit: Family's earned income and/or unearned income exceeded eligibility threshold

Did not maintain eligibility: Family did not submit requested documentation or did not comply with the requirements such as compliance with their Family Independence Plan

Did not reapply: Family did not recertify their eligibility for TCA when required, did not provide all documentation to recertify benefits, or missed the redetermination appointment

Ineligible: Family no longer met technical eligibility, such as no dependent children or reaching the 5-year time limit

Requested closure: Family requested to discontinue TCA benefits

Residency: Family no longer resides in Maryland, or their residency is unknown

Work sanction*: Adult recipient did not comply with work requirements

Child support sanction*: Adult did not comply with child support requirements

* Based on a limited case record review, there was a potential administrative data system error that suppressed the actual case closure code in the system. Case record reviews for all cases could not be conducted; therefore, cases are still listed as sanction closures although these are likely system errors, and families' cases closed for other reasons.

Conclusions

Maryland's TCA program has undergone several policy changes in recent years, aimed at promoting family well-being and stability. This brief focused on two new policies that temporarily exempted certain customers from work activity requirements. These exemptions were provided to two groups: (a) brand new TCA recipients; and (b) single parents with a child under age 1 who had exhausted the federal version of this exemption. These exemptions are designed to give families time to stabilize before meeting work participation requirements.

Few families—5% and less than 1% respectively—received these two exemptions during SFY 2023. There are several reasons for this limited uptake. First, the exemptions took effect 4 months into the fiscal year, potentially excluding families who began receiving TCA before the October 2022 effective date. Second, TANF benefits from another state can make recipients ineligible for the new recipient exemption despite being new to cash assistance in Maryland. Third, the child under 1 exemption only applies after the federal exemption is exhausted. Fourth, some adults may have chosen to participate in a work-related activity. Additionally, new policies may take time to fully implement across the state.

For those who did receive the exemption, several outcomes were examined during the 6 months after the work exemption ended. Sanctions were rare, affecting 3% to 7% of families. About 30% in each exemption group participated in a work activity, with employment and job search being the most

common. However, some adults faced barriers. In particular, more than one in 10 single parents with a child under 1 exemption reported challenges such as lack of child care.

Case closure was a common outcome, occurring in half of families in both exemption groups. For new recipients, closures were often due to income exceeding eligibility limits, suggesting improved financial stability. In contrast, single parents with a recently expired child under 1 exemption were more likely to exit the program due to missed redetermination applications or failure to maintain eligibility, potentially indicating ongoing instability. Often these closure reasons result in quick returns to the program as closure was not intended (Hall & Passarella, 2020).

These findings suggest that Maryland's work exemption policies can serve as a valuable tool for helping new TCA recipients stabilize before engaging in work activities. The relatively high rate of case closures due to increased income among new recipients may reflect the effectiveness of this approach in promoting job placements. However, the outcomes for single parents with a recently expired child under 1 exemption highlight the need for additional supportive services. Despite receiving a longer exemption period, many of these families still faced barriers. For all families to fully benefit, the work exemptions may need to be paired with strong case management that emphasizes the supportive services families need so that adults can work.

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For additional information, please contact Letitia Logan Passarella (llogan@ssw.umd.edu or 410.706.2479) at the School of Social Work.

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