

# Administrative Burdens Create Barriers for Parenting Students



Parenting students work hard every day to pursue their goals, often juggling work, classes, and caregiving responsibilities. Public systems and programs can provide critical support, but frequently create additional hurdles for parenting students and their families—especially those with low incomes. In 2022, the Center for the Study of Social Policy and Project SPARC conducted research to better understand the barriers experienced

by parenting students participating in CalWORKs, California’s cash assistance program for families with children.

This brief highlights findings from the research about parenting students' experiences navigating complicated program rules and requirements, including paperwork. This administrative burden creates significant hurdles for parents as they work toward their educational certificates and degrees.

“ I realized I was feeling burnt out. All the paperwork I have to do every month with CalWORKs. You have to do your student activity, you got to fill out the log for daycare. You need to do your transportation log, all the homework. It was a lot coming at me.”

— JESSICA, A MOM TO A YOUNG DAUGHTER AND A STUDENT IN CENTRAL COAST

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**Parenting students must complete time-consuming paperwork and navigate complicated systems to receive benefits to which they are entitled.**

Parents report having to complete paperwork to demonstrate that they meet the work requirement in CalWORKs, as well as submit logs documenting their child care and transportation needs to request and receive assistance.

“ The amount of paperwork is a hassle because you have to log all of the hours. You have to log the hours that you spent in school separate from the hours you spent studying. You have to calculate the hours that you were traveling... That’s really hard because you have to calculate everything, and then... that transfers into child care hours, too. [It’s hard] when you’re three exams deep in finals week and you [realize], ‘I didn’t do that.’”

— GRACE, A MOM AND A STUDENT IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

**Navigating systems is difficult for parenting students because they often cannot find anyone to help them within the system.**

Parents may or may not have a caseworker through CalWORKs. Even when they are assigned caseworkers, they often do not help them access other benefits—and difficulty communicating with caseworkers can sometimes lead to benefit cuts.

“ [My caseworker] would answer me in two or three days, but it took her forever to do something... She was my worker for about three or four years and I don’t know what happened. She dropped off the face of the earth and I just started getting new ones... We use the welfare to pay our rent, but this month they cut our welfare money just because they wanted my child’s immunization records and I couldn’t get ahold of my worker. So all of May, I’m trying to call her to settle it so I have enough for rent this month in June and she hasn’t answered me. So now they cut my money [and] I’m missing \$200 for rent.”

— CLARISA, A MOM OF TWO AND A STUDENT IN SOUTHERN SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY

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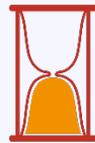


The frequent turnover among county caseworkers, along with their inaccessibility, leaves many parenting students confused about who to contact if they have questions or there are problems with their benefits.



## 3 caseworkers

The median number of caseworks, case managers, or counselors parenting students report having had since they first enrolled in CalWORKs is three.



## 50%

Among the survey respondents, 50 percent enrolled in CalWORKs between 2021 and 2022, a relatively short period of time to have had multiple caseworkers.



The inaccessibility and churn of caseworkers forces parenting students to spend time they intended to spend studying, caregiving, or working, instead advocating on their own behalf to ensure their benefits are not cut.



“ I got off CalWORKs because I didn't turn something in. It was a big mess...Next time, I'm going to take a selfie of me putting my papers in this box and record myself and make a video saying, 'Hello, it's me. I'm putting my paper in this box.' They didn't get it, so I had to reapply [for CalWORKs] a few times.”

— MELISSA, A MOM OF THREE AND A STUDENT IN INLAND EMPIRE

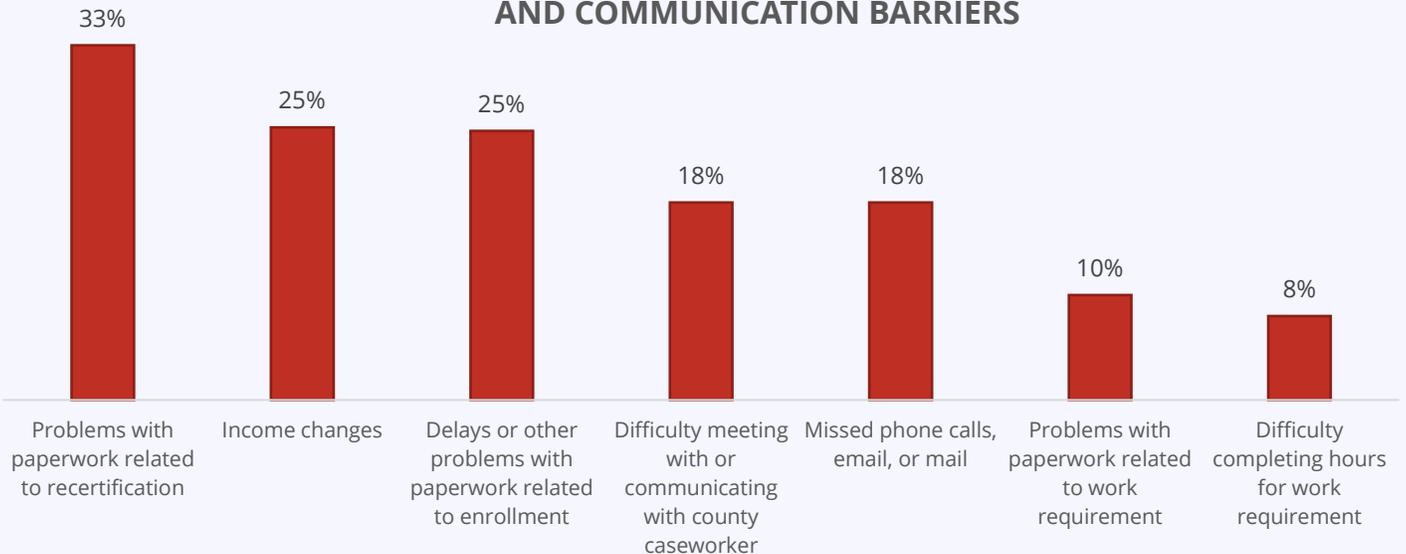
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The consequences for breakdowns in communication between caseworkers and families for late, lost, or misplaced paperwork are born entirely by parenting students and their families.

When difficulties arise with paperwork requirements or communication with caseworkers, families' benefits are often reduced or disrupted—taking away vital resources that families rely on to meet their basic needs.

## DISRUPTIONS TO CASH BENEFITS ARE COMMON BECAUSE OF PAPERWORK AND COMMUNICATION BARRIERS



When asked, "Has your CalWORKs cash benefit ever been reduced or disrupted for any of the following reasons? Select all that apply."

n=620



“ [Students] are afraid of missing a document or making a mistake on a document and losing everything, because it seems so drastic... It's like, 'If you don't get this in by the fifth, your case will be closed.' The ultimatums of when you're missing documentation or if you're turning in something incorrectly.”

— MARTINA, A CALWORKS ADVISOR AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

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**Public assistance systems are riddled with administrative burden and not designed to adequately support parenting students and low-income families. The result is that families who are already struggling have a harder time making ends meet and pursuing their goals.**

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“ The thing is the government, if you apply for one program, they have [all the] information about you. Why can't they share? Why do I have to go through huge paperwork [packets] every single time for every single department? I have my kids, I have to be there for them, for their schooling, for my work, for my studies and everything. But unfortunately, that system is really time taking. If you miss one thing, it goes back to zero. You have to start all over. It's really frustrating for people like us.”

— MARJAN, A MOM OF TWO AND STUDENT IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA



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## WHAT'S NEEDED NEXT

**Systems need to lift the burdens they put on families by redesigning processes to limit paperwork and other hurdles. The systems must be easier to navigate, and families should be able to get navigation support when necessary.**

“Recently my grant was lowered. [My daughter’s] social security card came six weeks after she was born. When it came, I didn’t think, ‘Oh, let me send this to CalWORKs.’ After you have a baby, you’re not thinking about that. I got a letter that’s like, ‘Your food stamps and cash aid are going down because we don’t have the card.’ So I called [my caseworker] and she put it in the [system] and said, ‘It’ll go back up, just send in a copy when you get a chance.’ That shows how [processes for benefits] can [be] simpler.”

— BIANCA, A MOM OF TWO AND A STUDENT IN NORTHERN SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY

## About the Research

In 2022, the CalWORKs Association’s Project SPARC—a cohort of parenting CalWORKs students from California community colleges—partnered with the Center for the Study of Social Policy to co-design research to better understand the barriers experienced by parenting students participating in CalWORKs. In the spring and summer of 2022, SPARC and CSSP conducted in-depth interviews with 40 parenting CalWORKs students and 20 community college CalWORKs staff, as well as fielded a survey of 688 parenting CalWORKs students from across California. Data in this series of briefs are products of the research. The research found that while parenting CalWORKs students are highly motivated, they too often struggle to achieve their goals because public systems are not designed to meet families’ needs and create barriers to their success.

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