

Chapter 5

CONTRACT OF PARTICIPATION

INTRODUCTION

Each family that is selected to participate in an FSS program must enter into a contract of participation with the PHA. This contract, which is signed by the head of the FSS family, sets forth the principal terms and conditions governing participation in the FSS program, including the rights and responsibilities of the FSS family and of the PHA, the services to be provided to the head of the FSS family and each adult member of the family who elects to participate in the program, and the activities to be completed by them. The contract also incorporates the individual training and services plan [24 CFR 984.303].

This chapter contains two parts:

Part I: Overview and Family Obligations: This part provides an overview of the form and content of the contract of participation and describes what the contract requires of FSS families.

Part II: Contract Specifications: This part explains the specifications of the contract, including terms and conditions, contract modification, contract terminations, and grievance procedures.

PART I: OVERVIEW AND FAMILY OBLIGATIONS

5-I.A. OVERVIEW

The purpose of the FSS contract of participation is to set forth the principal terms and conditions governing participation in the FSS program, including the incorporation the individual training and services plan (ITSP) as part of the contract's required contents. The ITSP is meant to establish goals for an FSS family to meet along the family's way to completing the contract and becoming self-sufficient. In addition to the goals specified in the ITSP, the contract also lists the responsibilities of the family and the PHA. This part covers the ITSP as part of the required contents of the contract of participation, and the family's obligations under the contract.

5-I.B. CONTENTS OF THE CONTRACT OF PARTICIPATION

Individual Training and Services Plan

As part of the required contents of the FSS contract of participation (COP), the individual training and services plan (ITSP) establishes specific interim and final goals by which the PHA and the family measure the family's progress toward fulfilling its obligations under the contract of participation and becoming self-sufficient. Interim and final goals will differ depending on the family's individual needs. Further, regulations require the establishment of an interim goal regarding independence from welfare assistance.

Interim Goals

For each participating FSS family that receives welfare assistance, the PHA must establish as an interim goal that the family become independent from welfare assistance and remain independent from welfare assistance for at least one year before the expiration of the term of the contract of participation, including any extension thereof [24 CFR 984.303(b)(2)].

At its discretion, the PHA may also elect to suggest this as an interim goal in the ITSP regardless of whether a family is receiving welfare assistance at the time the COP is developed.

Caribou Housing Agency Policy (2019)

The Caribou Housing Agency will require to each family participating in the FSS program, regardless of whether the family is receiving welfare assistance at the time the contract of participation is being developed, that the family include an interim goal on its individual training and services plan for the family to become independent from welfare assistance and remain welfare-free for at least one year before the expiration of the term of the contract of participation.

A disabled family may change their ITSP if necessary to follow their plan to be free of welfare for twelve (12) months and be employed for 6 months prior to the end of the COP.

Individual Training & Service Plans for Other than FSS Head

An individual training and services plan is only required for the head of the FSS family. This means that it is the PHA's decision, after consulting with the family, whether to create an ITSP

and provide supportive services to other family members aged 18 or over if they want to participate in the FSS program and supportive services are available [Notice PIH 93-24, G-16].

Caribou Housing Agency Policy

The Caribou Housing Agency will permit additional family members to have an ITSP.

5-I.C. FAMILY OBLIGATIONS

Compliance with Lease Terms

One of the obligations of the FSS family according to the contract of participation is to comply with the terms and conditions of the public housing lease or housing choice voucher program assisted lease [24 CFR 984.303(b)(3)].

Inability to comply with the lease represents an inability to comply with the contract, therefore regulations regarding noncompliance with the FSS contract apply [see 24 CFR 984.303(b)(5)]. It is up to the PHA to determine the plan of action for FSS families found in noncompliance with the lease and how the PHA will precisely define the term *comply with the lease*.

Caribou Housing Agency Policy

Comply with the lease means the FSS family has not been evicted for repeated or serious violations of the lease; or if they have been evicted for serious or repeated violations of the lease, the family has prevailed in either the grievance hearing or the informal hearing process.

The Caribou Housing Agency's FSS program will not terminate the FSS contract of participation for failure to comply with the terms of the lease.

Employment Obligation [24 CFR 984.303 (b)(4)]

Another obligation set forth by the contract of participation is for the head of the FSS family to *seek and maintain suitable employment* during the term of the contract and any extension. Although other members of the FSS family may seek and maintain employment during the term of the contract, it is only a requirement for the head of the FSS family.

The obligation for the head of the FSS family to *seek employment* is defined in the regulatory language as meaning that the head of the FSS family has applied for employment, attended job interviews, and has otherwise followed through on employment opportunities. However, this definition still leaves room for policy decisions on the part of the PHA because it does not define the level of activity involved in “seeking.”

There is no regulatory definition of *maintain employment*. For this reason, it is up to the PHA to define the term.

In addition, there is no minimum period of time that an FSS head of household needs to be employed in order to meet its contract of participation requirements [Notice PIH 93-24, G-9].

According to regulation, the PHA makes a determination of *suitable employment* based on the skills, education, and job training of the FSS head of household, and based on the available job opportunities within the jurisdiction served by the PHA [24 CFR 984.303(b)(4)(iii)]. This means that the PHA has the ultimate responsibility for making the decision regarding the suitability of employment. However, this decision must be made in conjunction with the head of the FSS family [Notice PIH 93-24, G-3].

Caribou Housing Agency Policy

For purposes of the Caribou Housing Agency’s FSS program, *seek employment* means the head of household has applied for employment, attended job interviews, and otherwise followed through on employment opportunities as outlined in the individual training and services plan of his or her contract of participation.

Maintain employment means that the FSS head of household will complete all of the obligations outlined in the individual training and services plan in his or her contract of participation (COP) and be employed full-time **for 6 months** on the last effective day of the COP; or, be employed part-time and enrolled, and participating as agreed, in a part-time education or training program on the last effective day of the COP. The PHA will require verification of this employment or enrollment.

Suitable employment is employment that is outlined in the individual training and services plan of the contract of participation and is based on the skills, education, and job training of the head of household.

Suitable employment must be 32 hours per week and may be a combination of more than one job.

For participants with disabilities, employment and hours worked will be determined on a case by case basis with documentation from a licensed medical provider.

5-I.D. CONSEQUENCES OF NONCOMPLIANCE WITH THE CONTRACT

Consequences apply for families who do not meet the terms and conditions of the contract. The regulations require that the contract of participation specify that if the FSS family fails to comply, without good cause, with the terms and conditions of the contract (including compliance with the public housing lease or the HCV-assisted lease), the PHA may:

- Withhold supportive services
- Terminate the family's participation in the FSS program

Per the alternative requirements listed in the *Federal Register* notice dated December 29, 2014, PHAs are no longer permitted to terminate HCV assistance to a family due to the family's failure to meet its obligations under the contract of participation [FR Notice 12/29/14].

PHA Policy

The contract of participation (COP) will be terminated before the expiration of the contract term if the participant fails to meet, without “good cause,” their obligations as outlined in the COP. If the participant fails to meet its obligations outlined in the COP, the FSS coordinator, or their designee, will first meet with the family to reassess the need for supportive services or a change in the individual training and services plan (ITSP). Then, if a reassessment of supportive services or a change in the ITSP is not successful in bringing the family in compliance, the FSS coordinator will withhold supportive services for no more than 90 days until the participant meets their obligations outlined in the COP. Finally, if neither of these alternatives is successful, the FSS coordinator will terminate the COP for failure to complete the tasks, interim goals, or final goals of the ITSP in a timely manner, and thus failure to complete the obligations outlined in the COP.

The FSS coordinator will make an exception to the actions in terminating the COP if the participant can demonstrate “good cause” for the failure to meet its obligations as outlined in the COP.

For purposes of the PHA FSS program, *good cause* includes:

Family circumstances

Death in the family

Serious illness

Medical emergency

Mandatory court appearances

Involuntary loss of employment

Loss of head of household through death, incarceration, or removal from lease

Change in the ITSP improving progress toward economic self-sufficiency

Community circumstances

Significant reduction in workforce (over 20 percent reduction in employment field)

Significant interruption in service delivery (over 3 months interruption)

Provider noncompliance with regulation

Provider unable/unwilling to provide service

Provider offering inferior service

PART II. CONTRACT SPECIFICATIONS

5-II.A. OVERVIEW

In addition to making clear the family's obligations under the program, the contract of participation contains specific terms and conditions, including those governing contract modifications, terminations, and grievance procedures. This part describes those specifications and associated policy.

5-II.B. CONTRACT TERM [24 CFR 984.303(c)]

The contract term is five years. This means that the family has no more than five years from the effective date of the contract of participation (COP) to fulfill their obligations as specified in the contract. This five year term requirement will be specified in the COP.

Contract Extension [24 CFR 984.303(d)]

While the term set forth in the contract of participation is for five years, contract extensions are possible. According to regulation, PHAs will for "good cause" extend the term of the contract for a period not to exceed two years for any FSS family that requests an extension of the contract in writing. The family's written request for an extension must include a description of the need for the extension. *Good cause* means circumstances beyond the control of the FSS family, as determined by the PHA, such as a serious illness or involuntary loss of employment (further defined by PHA policy in Section 5-I.D.). Extension of the contract of participation will entitle the FSS family to continue to have amounts credited to the family's FSS account.

FSS Re-enrollment

Caribou Housing Agency Policy (2019)

Past participants may be eligible to apply for re-enrollment into the Family Self-Sufficiency. (FSS) Program after one (1) year of previous contract of participation, in good standing, as a result of a catastrophic or qualifying event including but not limited to the following:

- *Death in the family (of a working member)*
- *Loss of employment or loss of income*
- *Medical*
- *Change of Martial Standing (Divorce or Separation)*

Decision to allow re-enrollment will be made in accordance with HUD rules and Regulations.

5-II.C. MODIFICATION OF THE CONTRACT

The contract of participation (COP) does have the ability to be modified, as long as the PHA and the FSS family mutually agree to modify it. This includes modifications in writing with respect to the individual training and services plans (ITSPs), the contract term (See Section 5-II.B. above), and designation of the head of the family [24 CFR 984.303(f)].

In addition, the PHA may also delete the line in the COP under “Corrective Actions to Meet Family Responsibilities” stating that if the family is participating in the HCV program, the PHA may terminate HCV assistance when allowed by HUD requirements. Mutual agreement is not needed for this modification [Notice PIH 95-5]. Termination of HCV assistance is covered in further detail in Section 5-II.G. The conditions under which the PHA will modify the contract are set forth in the policy below.

Caribou Housing Agency Policy

In the Caribou Housing Agency’s FSS program, the COP will be modified by agreement between the Housing Agency and the head of household:

When modifications to the ITSP improve the participant’s ability to complete their obligations in the COP or progress toward economic self- sufficiency

When the designated head of the FSS family ceases to reside with other family members in the assisted unit, and the remaining family members, after consultation with the public housing or HCV program representative, designate another family member to be the head of household and receive escrow funds

When a relocating family is entering the FSS program of a receiving housing agency and the start date of the COP must be changed to reflect the date the new COP is signed with the receiving Agency

5-II.D. COMPLETION OF THE CONTRACT

By regulation, the contract of participation is considered to be completed, and a family's participation in the FSS program is considered to be concluded when one of the following occurs [24 CFR 984.303(g)]:

- The FSS family has fulfilled all of its obligations under the contract of participation on or before the expiration of the contract term, including any extension thereof.
- 30 percent of the monthly adjusted income of the FSS family equals or exceeds the published existing housing fair market rent for the size of the unit for which the FSS family qualifies based on the PHA's occupancy standards. The contract of participation will be considered completed and the family's participation in the FSS program concluded on this basis even though the contract term, including any extension thereof, has not expired, and the family members who have individual training and services plans have not completed all the activities set forth in their plans.

Policies on verifying completion of the contract of participation can be found in Section 6-I.C. of this action plan.

5-II.E. TRANSITIONAL SUPPORTIVE SERVICE ASSISTANCE

Even after a family has completed the contract of participation, a PHA may continue to offer appropriate FSS supportive services to a former FSS family whose head of family is employed. If the family still resides in public housing, or HCV-assisted housing, these supportive services would be offered for becoming self-sufficient. If the family no longer resides in public housing, HCV-assisted housing, or other assisted housing, these supportive services would be offered for remaining self-sufficient [24 CFR 984.303(j)].

Caribou Housing Agency Policy

The Caribou Housing Agency will continue to offer supportive services to a former FSS family who has completed its contract of participation, and whose head of family is employed.

5-II.F. TERMINATION OF THE CONTRACT

The contract of participation may be terminated before the expiration of the contract term and any extension of the contract by the following [24 CFR 984.303(h)]:

- Mutual consent of the parties
- Failure of the FSS family to meet its obligations under the contract of participation without good cause, including in an HCV FSS program the failure to comply with the contract requirements because the family has moved outside the jurisdiction of the PHA
- The family's withdrawal from the FSS program
- Such other act as is deemed inconsistent with the purpose of the FSS program
- Operation of law

Caribou Housing Agency Policy

The COP will be terminated before the expiration of the contract term, and any extension thereof, for any of the following reasons:

Mutual consent of the parties

Failure of the FSS family to meet its obligations under the contract of participation without good cause

In an HCV FSS program, failure to comply with the contract requirements because the family has moved outside the jurisdiction of the PHA without continued assistance under portability

Family's withdrawal from the FSS program

Such other act as is deemed inconsistent with the purpose of the FSS program

Operation of law

If the FSS family faces termination due to failing to meet, without good cause, its obligations under the COP, the Caribou Housing Agency will follow the relevant policy specified in Section 5-I.D. of this action plan.

Good cause for the purposes of the FSS program is also defined in Section 5-I.D.

In addition, the contract of participation is automatically terminated if the family's HCV assistance is terminated in accordance with HUD requirements [24 CFR 984.303(h)].

5-II.G. OPTION TO WITHHOLD OR TERMINATE SUPPORTIVE SERVICE AND HOUSING ASSISTANCE [24 CFR 984.303(b)(5)(i)]

As touched upon in Section 5-I.D. of this action plan, the PHA has the option to terminate or withhold supportive services and the FSS family's participation in the FSS program if the PHA determines that the FSS family has failed to comply without good cause with the requirements of the contract of participation.

Per the alternative requirements listed in the *Federal Register* notice dated December 29, 2014, however, PHAs are no longer permitted to terminate HCV assistance to a family due to the family's failure to meet its obligations under the contract of participation [FR Notice 12/29/14].

Caribou Housing Agency Policy

The Caribou Housing Agency will not withhold or terminate supportive services if the housing agency determines that the FSS family failed to comply without good cause with the requirements of the COP unless the actions prompting termination of the FSS COP would also, independently, prompt termination of the HCV voucher.

5-II.H. NULLIFICATION OF CONTRACT FOR UNAVAILABILITY OF SUPPORTIVE SERVICES [24 CFR 984.303(e)]

In addition to termination, the contract of participation can also be ended ahead of time as a result of integral supportive services being unavailable. This, however, should only occur as a last resort:

- If a social service agency fails to deliver the supportive services pledged under an FSS family member's individual training and services plan (ITSP), the PHA must make a good faith effort to obtain these services from another agency.
- If the PHA is unable to obtain the services from another agency, the PHA must reassess the family member's needs and determine whether other available services would achieve the same purpose.
- If other available services would not achieve the same purpose, the PHA shall determine whether the unavailable services are integral to the FSS family's advancement or progress toward self-sufficiency.
- If the unavailable services are not integral to the FSS family's advancement toward self-sufficiency, the PHA must revise the ITSP, delete these services, and modify the contract of participation to remove any obligation on the part of the FSS family to accept the unavailable services.
- If the unavailable services *are* determined to be integral to the FSS family's advancement toward self-sufficiency (which may be the case if the affected family member is the head of the FSS family), the PHA shall declare the contract of participation null and void.

Nullification of the contract of participation on the basis of unavailability of supportive services shall not be grounds for termination of HCV assistance.

5-II.I. GRIEVANCE PROCEDURES

When adverse action is taken by the PHA against a family, the PHA is required to provide a grievance hearing in the public housing program, or an informal hearing in the housing choice voucher program [24 CFR 966 subpart B, 24 CFR 982.554].

According to regulatory requirements, the FSS action plan must contain the grievance and hearing procedures available for FSS families against whom the PHA has taken adverse action with regards to FSS [24 CFR 984.201(d)(9)].

Caribou Housing Agency Policy

The grievance and informal hearing procedures for the FSS program will be the same as the grievance and hearing procedures adopted for the housing choice voucher program in the Caribou Housing Agency's administrative plan, respectively (See Chapter 16 Part III in the Administrative Plan).

Adverse actions taken within the FSS program include:

- Denial of admission into the FSS program
- Denial of request for supportive services
- Denial of request to change the ITSP
- Denial of request to change the head of household
- Denial of request for interim disbursement of the escrow account
- Denial of request to complete the COP
- Denial of a request for extension to the FSS COP
- Denial of request for final distribution of the escrow account or any portion thereof
- Withholding of support services
- Termination of the FSS COP
- Withholding of HCV rental assistance, when the PHA operates an HCV FSS program
- Termination of HCV rental assistance, when the PHA operates an HCV FSS program
- Denial of transitional services