

# Second Annual Report to the Legislature and the Governor

## Washington Connection Benefit Portal



RCW 74.04.225

2010 Engrossed Second Substitute House Bill 2782, Section 2

*Establishment of an Online Opportunity Portal to Provide More Effective Access to Available Services*

December 1, 2012



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*TTY/VCO users may also call Washington Relay Service by dialing 711.*

## Executive Summary

This is the second annual report in fulfillment of [RCW 74.04.225](#). The 2010 Legislature enacted legislation E2SHB2782 to strengthen existing efforts of state agencies to implement an online benefit portal, [Washington Connection](#), and to simplify and streamline access to a broad array of state, federal and local services and benefits.

Washington Connection has proven to be a successful tool providing people access to an array of services and benefits. The customer feedback has been very positive indicating the website is user friendly, convenient, and easy to use. Client efficiency is gained by saving them time and money. Successfully implemented in December 2010 and enhanced quarterly thereafter, Washington Connection has received national recognition such as the Bright Ideas award from the Ash Center at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

### *Background*

The Washington State Legislature required an efficient, effective, integrated approach to the delivery of basic support services as well as education and training programs. This approach is accomplished via the Washington Connection Benefit Portal through strong partnerships between government agencies, community partners, community colleges, and philanthropic organizations.

Implemented in December 2010, the Washington Connection benefit portal offers easy access for residents to learn about benefits and services and submit an application online. The portal has removed barriers for many residents in applying for and renewing benefits to meet basic needs. The portal also provides online tools for community-based organizations to help their clients in applying for services and benefits.

The Secretary of the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) serves as the executive sponsor of the Washington Connection Advisory Committee comprised of representatives from private and public organizations (*see Appendix A*). The Advisory Committee guides the direction of Washington Connection's long-term strategies while the Department administers the tasks to support the portal and its daily operations.

Currently the residents can apply electronically for up to 28 state and federal benefit programs through Washington Connection, and the City of Seattle residents can apply for additional seven services provided by the City (*see Appendix B*).

## *National Recognition*

DSHS and its partners fully embrace the vision and direction set by the legislation. The accomplishment is achieved through active collaboration with stakeholders and community based organizations. This model of leveraging private-public partnerships to provide services and benefits through an online portal is effective and unique. As a result, Washington Connection received the 2012 Bright Ideas award from the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government in recognition of its use of innovative technology to address mounting demands for social services and benefits in the face of diminishing state resources.

## *Update on Legislative Requirements*

Throughout the state, Department staff in Community Services Offices (CSOs) and Mobile CSOs help individuals apply for services and benefits. Residents can also work with community-based organizations to **access the portal at a wide array of locations**. As of September 2012, Washington Connection has registered 622 community partners (see *Appendix C*). Each organization registered either as a Host Organization that simply provides access to computers and information brochures or as an Assisting Agency that provides staff to help individuals apply for benefits using Washington Connection. Of the 622 partners, there were 508 Host Organizations and 114 Assisting Agencies.

One of the legislative requirements is to **implement paperless application processes** for the services offered through Washington Connection. The overall online submissions – including online applications, reports of change in circumstances, and eligibility renewals – have grown nine percent since Washington Connection was implemented in December 2010 (see *Page 9 for more information*).

To explore opportunities to increase online (paperless) submissions, discussions about adding new programs to online application have taken place with the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Department of Health, Department of Commerce, Pierce County, and local Housing Authorities. Barriers to adding their programs to online application include: (1) the need for in-person assessments during the application process, (2) the lack of a database system that could receive and process online application data, and (3) the special needs of various populations that prefer paper applications. DSHS staff supporting Washington Connection will continue to collaborate

with these potential partnering government agencies to explore solutions in addressing these barriers.

### *Customer Input and Online Customer Survey Outcomes*

Through a “*contact us*” link on the website, e-mails, focus groups, and an online customer survey, the Department has been collecting customer, staff and community partner feedback to improve the system. Examples of recent improvements include redesigning the homepage to make it more user friendly, providing community partners with access to additional client information, and adding a public access directory at the county level.

The Department posted the online survey for Washington Connection in October 2011. The survey results revealed how the portal is functioning and offered some consistent themes:

- More than 80 percent of the Washington Connection customers use the portal to find and get social services or benefits for themselves or their families.
- More than 80 percent of the customers would recommend the portal to others.
- More than 60 percent rate the portal as “*good*” or “*very good*.”

### *Success Indicators and Outcomes*

A cross-agency measurement team with representatives from benefit program managers, information technology analysts, research staff and collaborating consultants identified a number of key success indicators for Washington Connection. Each success indicator may include a number of measurements. The key success indicators identified include:

- Online customer survey results by clients and community-based organizations
- Number and percent of applications submitted through Washington Connection
- Number of clients who created Client Benefit Accounts in Washington Connection
- Number of registered community based organizations (CBO)
- Number of partnering Assisting Agencies that created CBO Accounts
- Number of benefit programs that can be applied online through Washington Connection

# Full Report on Washington Connection Benefit Portal 2012



The Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS or the Department) submits this second report in fulfillment of [RCW 74.04.225](#). The 2010 Legislature enacted legislation to strengthen existing efforts of state agencies to implement an online benefit portal, Washington Connection, to simplify and streamline access to a broad array of state, federal and local benefits.

## Background

The Department, working in collaboration with community partners, government agencies, tribes and local jurisdictions, and with the support of philanthropic organizations, formed a private-public partnership and steering committee. Together, these organizations sought the necessary private funding to develop the benefit portal, initially referred to as the Washington State Benefit Portal Partnership Project. The Steering Committee chartered a project team and established a shared governance structure. In July 2010, the portal was named [Washington Connection](#) with a tagline *Your Link to Services*. The portal began providing online application access to state benefits in December 2010, and expanded its functionality to include benefit programs administered by the City of Seattle in August 2011.

Upon completion of the initial project to develop and launch Washington Connection, the private-public Steering Committee shifted to an advisory role. The Secretary of the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) serves as the executive sponsor of the Washington Connection Advisory Committee, which is comprised of representatives from private and public organizations (*see Appendix A*). Together, they guide the direction of Washington Connection's long-term strategies while DSHS administers the tasks to support the portal and its daily operations. The Washington Connection Advisory Committee is developing a Strategic Plan for 2013-2015 that is expected to be finalized in December 2012.

Washington Connection now provides 28 state and federal programs for which state residents can apply electronically. City of Seattle residents can apply for additional seven services provided by the City (*see Appendix B*). To add more benefit programs to Washington Connection online application, the Department has explored new partnership opportunities with the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Department of Health, Department of Commerce, Pierce County, and local Housing Authorities.

There is a high level of commitment within the Washington Connection Advisory Committee, the Partnership Subcommittee, and the Department. Staff members are committed to improving the technology and community outreach to accomplish the Washington Connection Vision that “Everyone in Washington State is able to meet basic needs and has the opportunity to prosper.”

To implement RCW 74.04.225, representatives from both private and public sectors collaboratively developed the mission for the Washington Connection portal to increase access to a variety of services and benefits for low-income individuals and families in Washington State. Over the past two years, the Washington Connection partnership has made significant progress in achieving this mission through creating an online benefit portal that sets the foundation for moving towards the vision.

## **National Recognition**

The Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at the Harvard’s Kennedy School awarded Washington Connection its 2012 Bright Ideas award. In 2010, the Innovations in American Government Awards Program launched Bright Ideas to recognize and promote excellence and creativity in the public sector. Ash Center’s Government Innovators Network will highlight Washington Connection on its homepage and include it in a searchable database in 2013.

Washington Connection received this prestigious recognition because of its innovative approach to use technology to address mounting demands for social services and benefits in the face of diminishing state resources. Through collaborative partnership with private foundations and nonprofit community organizations, the Department developed this web-based benefit portal to meet the needs of low-income residents seeking information, screening for eligibility and applying for up to 28 state and federal benefits plus seven City of Seattle benefit programs using the same online application.



## Update on Legislative Requirements

In its first report to the Washington Legislature, the Department of Social and Health Services detailed how it met each of the major requirements set forth in RCW 74.04.225. Provided in this second report are status updates to the requirements. The major requirements are noted in *Italics font* below and the Department's results follow.

### **Provide Residents Access at a Wide Array of Locations**

*Requirement: Provide access to the portal at a wide array of locations including but not limited to: community or technical colleges, community college campuses where community service offices are colocated, community-based organizations, libraries, churches, food banks, state agencies, early education sites, and labor unions.*

Result Achieved: As of September 2012, DSHS and the Washington Connection Advisory Committee recruited 622 Community Partners, including 114 Assisting Agencies and 508 Host Organizations. Ongoing outreach efforts continue. Individuals seeking assistance may gain access to Washington Connection from their homes, kiosks at the Department's local Community Services Offices (CSOs), community and technical colleges, community-based organizations, libraries, churches, food banks, some state agencies, early childhood education sites, labor unions, and other locations, including health care clinics.

A key strategy of Washington Connection's Advisory Committee is to increase the number of community partner agencies that can assist individuals who cannot complete an online application by themselves. They also actively promote the use of the portal for continued client service and follow-up.

Ongoing outreach is essential to engage more community partners in using Washington Connection as well as educate them about the website's functions and opportunities for helping clients, especially underserved populations. For example, the participation rate for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps) was 72 percent among eligible Washington residents in 2009, but only 34 percent for elderly and 15.6 percent for Hispanics.

Communicating with community partners also helps identify barriers in reaching underserved populations and using Washington Connection. Because there are fewer public transportation options and gasoline is expensive, expanded use of Washington Connection would be a helpful option for residents in rural areas. Many of the underserved populations also reside in rural areas.

### Implement Paperless Application Processes

*Requirement: The department shall develop a plan for implementing paperless application processes for the services included in the opportunity portal for which the electronic exchange of application information is possible. The plan should include a goal of achieving, to the extent possible, the transition of these services to the paperless application processes by July 1, 2012. The plan must comply with federal statutes and regulations and must allow applicants to submit applications by alternative means to ensure that access to benefits will not be restricted.*

Result Achieved: To implement paperless application process, ongoing efforts are in place to increase the number of benefit programs that can be applied online through Washington Connection. Online (paperless) submissions – including online applications, reports of change in circumstances, and eligibility renewals – have grown nine percent since Washington Connection was implemented in December 2010. The volume of online submissions was close to 1.2 million and was distributed as follows:

Type of Online Submission	December 2010	September 2012
Online Application	52% of total	55% of total
Report of Changes	45% of total	67% of total
Eligibility Renewal	17% of total	28% of total
All Online Submissions	37% of total	46% of total

Source: DSHS Barcode

Department staff members continue to explore opportunities to add more benefit programs to portal online application, which will ultimately reduce the use of paper applications. Through discussions with other state agencies and local jurisdictions, the Department identified the following barriers:

- Some benefit programs require an in-person assessment or consultation with local contracted agencies as part of the application process, such as the WIC (Women, Infants and Children) Supplemental Nutrition Program and the Supplemental Security Income program for aged, blind or disabled individuals with little or no income.
- Many governmental agencies (state, county, city, or Tribe) do not have database systems to receive or process online application data. For example, the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) managed by the Department of Commerce relies on local contractors to process applications at this time. The Department of Commerce will need to make changes to their database system and possibly their business model before they can receive online application data from Washington Connection.
- For various populations, paper applications are more accessible than the online application. These populations include homebound elderly, individuals with disabilities and persons who cannot read English or Spanish (translations in other languages are available in paper forms only). However, DSHS is seeing more community outreach organizations' staff take the application process out to individuals who need help, using mobile devices such as i-Pads, tablets, and laptops.

The Department embraces the goal of maximizing the proportion of online applications for benefits while realizing that not all applications can come in through an online process due to the barriers described above. To comply with federal statutes and regulations, the Department and its Washington Connection partners must allow applicants to submit applications by alternative means to ensure that access to benefits and services will not be restricted.

## Customer Input and Online Customer Survey Outcomes

Department staff members actively solicit feedback from customers using Washington Connection through a “*contact us*” link on the portal, e-mails, focus groups, and an online survey. The Department continues to use these sources to improve the functionality, appearance and navigation of Washington Connection after hearing from Washington Connection customers, community partners and Department staff. Recent improvements include the following:

- Redesigned the Washington Connection homepage, released October 2012, after soliciting feedback on the information offered online and the usability of the website
- Implemented an online reporting tool to document Medicaid-eligible newborns and initiate the auto-enrollment for the Children’s Health Insurance Program
- Added the online registration tool for community-based organizations (CBOs) to sign up as Host Organizations or Assisting Agencies of Washington Connection
- Provided community partners with access to additional client information through the CBO Account “*Client Search*” query function
- Posted a county-level public access directory of Host Organizations and Assisting Agencies that offer public access to customers in need of help
- Added a link in the portal to the Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing’s *Telephone Equipment Distribution Program* in July 2012

In addition, Washington Connection partners requested reports to allow them to evaluate the effectiveness of the website and to develop strategies to maximize the use of the online application. Department staff completed Phase 1 reports for internal staff in August 2012. The next phase of this enhancement will make the reports available to external partners through Washington Connection.

## Washington Connection Annual Expenditures

### Information Technology Maintenance and Operations

The maintenance and operations expenditures for the period August 2011 through July 2012 totaled \$333,254. In addition to software costs, this figure includes personnel resources for business analysis, web architecture, technical support, application development, testing, help desk, and customer support.

### Business Administration

The administrative expenditures for the period of August 2011 through July 2012 totaled \$212,622. This figure represents Department staff responsible for duties including setting business priorities, supporting the Advisory Committee, community partner outreach and training, public marketing, partnership development with governmental agencies, as well as data analysis and reporting.

## Success Indicators and Outcomes

A cross-agency measurement team with representatives from benefit program managers, information technology analysts, research staff and collaborating consultants identified a number of key success indicators for Washington Connection. Each success indicator may include a number of measurements. The key success indicators identified include:

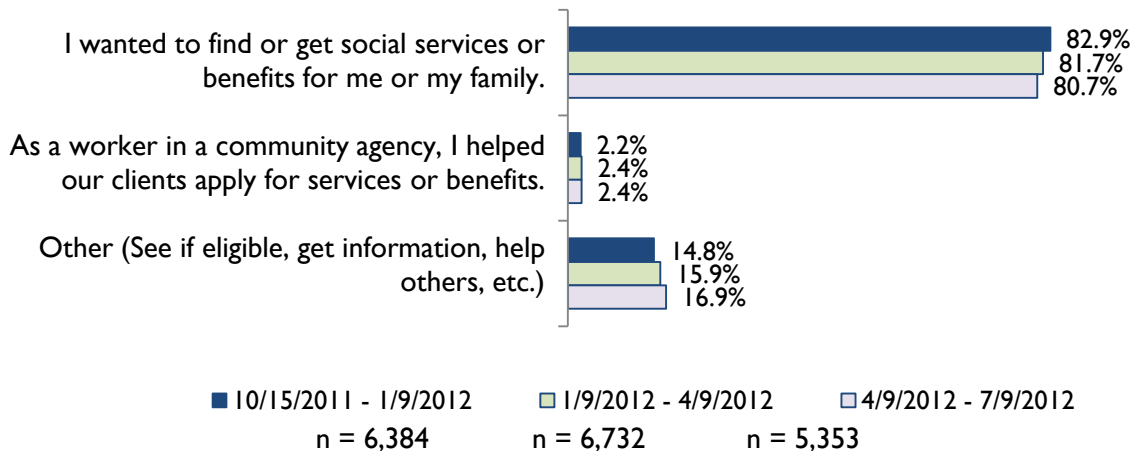
- Online customer survey results by clients and community-based organizations
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The following section provides the data supporting these success indicators.

## Online Customer Survey Results

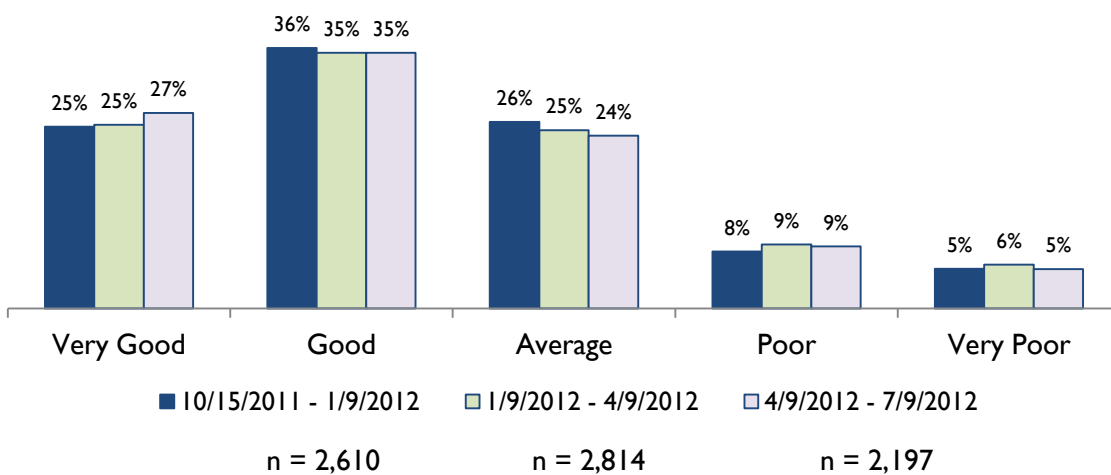
The initial online customer survey on Washington Connection ran from October 2011 through July 9, 2012. The customer survey results were relatively consistent over time.

Figure 1 – Why did you visit Washington Connection website?



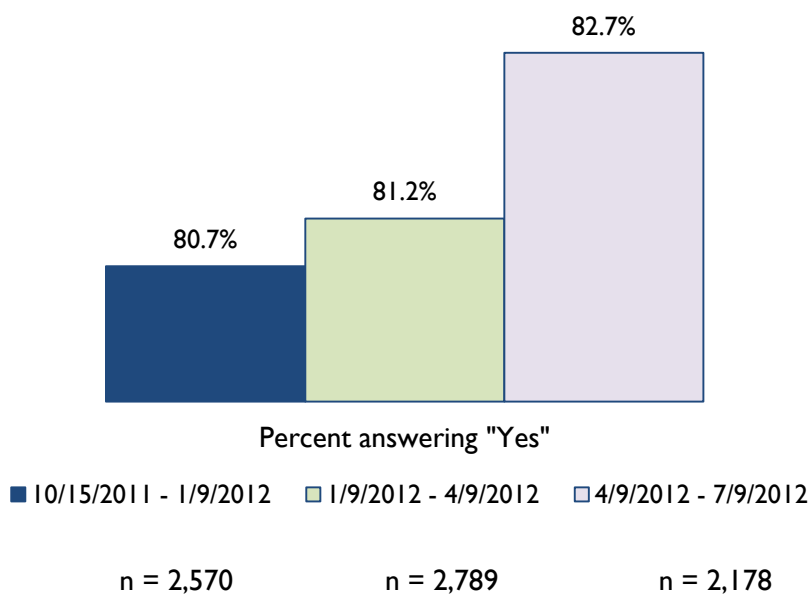
**Figure 1 Summary** – More than 80 percent of those responding to the survey visited the website to find or get benefits or services for themselves or their families. The “Other” category, which indicates eligibility checking and information gathering, increased to almost 17 percent over the report periods.

Figure 2 – Overall, how would you rate the Washington Connection website?



**Figure 2 Summary** – The overall rating of the website has shown some recent improvement with 62.1 percent giving the site a “Good” or “Very Good” rating the last quarter compared with about 61 percent for the two previous quarters.

**Figure 3** – *Would you recommend the Washington Connection website to people who are trying to find social services or benefits?*



**Figure 3 Summary** – Figure 3 shows an increasing percentage of respondents agreeing that they would recommend Washington Connection to others trying to find social services or benefits. Over the three quarters, more than 80 percent of survey respondents would recommend the portal to others.





### Online and Paper Submissions

Residents can make three types of submissions either through the online Washington Connection Benefit Portal or by paper:

1. Application for benefits and services
2. Eligibility renewal
3. Report of change in circumstances

To measure the success of Washington Connection, the Department and its partners monitor the market share of online submissions compared to paper submissions. From December 2010, the beginning of the Washington Connection Benefit Portal, through September 2012, the cumulative number of online submissions reached almost 1.2 million.

Figure 4 – Online Submissions by Type – December 2010 and September 2012

Trend	Type of Online Submission	December 2010	September 2012	Difference
	Online Application	52%	55%	+3%
	Report of Changes	45%	67%	+22%
	Eligibility Renewals	17%	28%	+11%
	All Online Submissions	37%	46%	+9%

Source: DSHS Barcode

**Figure 4 Summary** – Figure 4 shows that the share of online submissions of all types (applications, change in circumstances and eligibility reviews) has increased over the period of December 2010 to September 2012 by 9 percent. The trend lines show that for all types of submissions, online use is growing.

Over the reporting period, overall online submissions increased from 37 percent to 46 percent. Each of the components of online submissions increased as well.

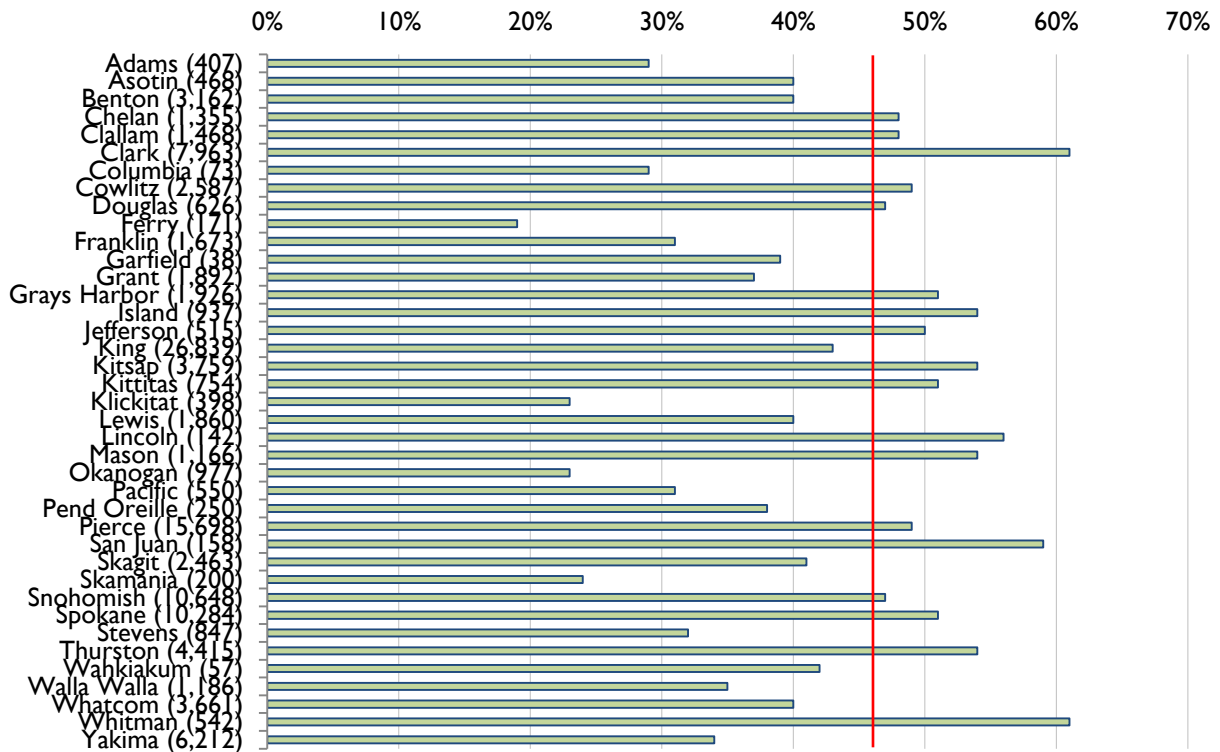
Online applications comprised 55 percent of all applications in September 2012, up from 52 percent. Change in circumstances requests increased from 45 percent to 67 percent, which showed the greatest increase and the highest online participation rate over time. Eligibility reviews increased from 17 percent to 28 percent from December 2010 through September 2012.



## Total Online Submissions by County

There are two ways for Washington residents to apply, renew or report change in circumstances online. They can apply from home or from public access places, such as public libraries, or they can seek help from community-based organizations called Assisting Agencies.

Figure 5 – Percent of Online Submissions by County  
(Provided in parentheses is the count of total submissions – including paper and online)  
September 2012



Note: There were 607 submissions from Headquarters/Statewide in the totals, of which 55 percent were online.

Source: DSHS Barcode

**Figure 5 Summary** – Figure 5 shows the online share of all submissions by county for September 2012. The total count of submissions, including online and paper, are in parentheses next to the county.

The statewide average in September 2012 for the share of online submissions was 46 percent (*see red line*). Eighteen of the counties, or 46 percent, had an online share of 46 percent or above. Twelve of those counties had online shares of 50 percent and above.

Six counties accounted for nearly two-thirds of all the submissions for benefits, including online and paper submissions. These counties in rank order are King, Pierce, Snohomish, Spokane, Clark and Yakima, the same ones that consistently account for the highest concentrations of poverty as well as public assistance usage.

### **Benefit Programs available through Washington Connection**

There are 35 benefit programs available through Washington Connection, including 28 State and Federal programs and seven City of Seattle programs for which City residents can apply online. (*See Appendix B for the detailed listing.*)

### **Client Benefit Accounts**

Clients who are receiving benefits from the Department or Health Care Authority can create Client Benefit Accounts (CBAs) that provide them with “*real-time*” online access to monitor their benefit history and amount (of cash, food or medical assistance). They can access this free and secure website 24 hours a day, seven days a week, reducing the need to call the Contact Center about their cases.

Clients with CBAs can see the list of household members, their program status (active or suspended), and benefit amounts and dates. They can also see the type of documents submitted through Washington Connection and received by the Department.

There were 25,625 User IDs (identifications) created in Washington Connection for online applications as of October 24, 2011. Among them, 1,384 also had Client Benefit Accounts. Since then, the number of users has almost tripled with 71,820 User IDs as of August 12, 2012. Of those with User IDs, 12,339 had created Client Benefit Accounts and of which 10,850 were active. The latest number shows close to a nine-fold increase among those with Client Benefit Accounts.

## Registered Community Partners

As of September 20, 2012, the number of community partners was 622 (*see Appendix C for maps of Assisting Agencies and Host Organizations*). Of this number, 114 were Assisting Agencies, an increase of 30 Assisting Agencies from October 24, 2011.

Assisting Agencies are community-based organizations that have staff or volunteers who help individuals in completing and submitting online applications through Washington Connection. Assisting Agencies are required to fill out a DSHS Data Share Agreement and a Confidentiality Non-Disclosure form.

There were 508 Host Organizations as of September 20, 2012. Host Organizations are local organizations that provide public or limited access to computers with the desktop icon to Washington Connection, plus any brochures or printed material regarding Washington Connection. Their staff members provide limited assistance to clients.

# Appendices



## Appendix A – Advisory Committee Membership: 2012 - 2013

### Executive Sponsor

Robin Arnold-Williams, Secretary, Department of Social and Health Services

### Committee Members

David Bley, Director, Pacific Northwest Initiative, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

John Bowers, Director of Workforce Education, North Seattle Community College

Gina Breukelman, Community Investor: Health and Human Services, Global Corporate Citizenship, Boeing Company

Robert Coit, Executive Director, Thurston County Food Bank

Bradley Finnegan, Senior Policy Analyst, Health Benefit Exchange

Ed Fox, Health Director, Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe

Patty Hayes, Director, Community Health Services Division, Public Health Seattle and King County

Debbie Kendall, Technology Advisor, OFM Office of the Chief Information Officer

Diane Klontz, Managing Director, Community Economic Opportunity, Department of Commerce

Sue Langen, Chief Information Officer, Department of Social and Health Services

Tony Lee (Co-Chair), Policy Director, Statewide Poverty Action Network, Solid Ground

Carol Mizoguchi, Director, Casey Family Programs

Chris Morton, Executive Director, Associated Ministries

Alexis Oliver, Policy Advisor, Governor’s Executive Policy Office

Manning Pellanda, Managing Director, Eligibility and Service Delivery, Health Care Authority

Alice Shobe, Executive Director, Building Changes

Dannette R. Smith, Director, Human Services Department, City of Seattle

Laura Smith, Executive Director, Washington Dental Service Foundation

David Stillman (Chair), Assistant Secretary, Economic Services Administration, Department of Social and Health Services

Barbara Wasserman, Medical Social Worker, Swinomish Tribe

(Vacant), Washington House of Representatives

(Vacant), Washington State Senate

## Appendix B – Benefit Programs Available through Online Application

### State and federal benefit programs (28 programs)

#### Basic Food

Food Assistance Program for Legal Immigrants – state funded

Cash (the worker determines programs for which the client is eligible)

- Temporary Assistance for Needy Family (TANF)

- Refugee Cash Assistance

- Aging, Blind, Disability (ABD) Cash Assistance

- Pregnant Women's Assistance

- Diversion Cash Assistance

- Consolidated Emergency Assistance Program

- State Family Assistance Program

- State Supplemental Payment

Medical (the worker determines programs for which the client is eligible)

- Family Medical

- ABD Medical (Single Disabled)

- Alien Emergency Medical

- Medical Care Services (Disability Lifeline Medical)

- Take Charge Family Planning

Children's Medical (the worker determines program for which the child is eligible)

- Children's Medical and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)

Pregnancy Medical

Drug or Alcohol Treatment

Help with medical bills (from the last three months)

Medicare Savings Program

Psychiatric Indigent Inpatient

Healthcare / Workers with Disabilities

Working Connections Child Care

In-Home Long Term Care Services

Assisted Living Facility / Adult Family Home

Nursing Home

Hospice

### City of Seattle benefit programs (7 programs)

Utility Discount Program

City Light's Emergency Low-Income Assistance

Seattle Public Utilities' Emergency Assistance for Water

Child Care Assistance

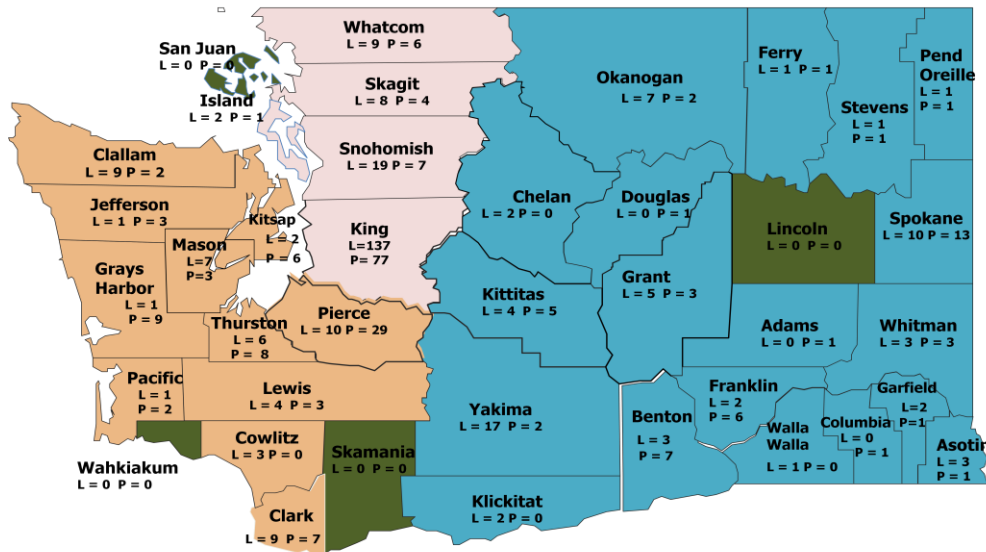
Step Ahead Preschool Program

Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP)

Weatherization Assistance through HomeWise Program

# Appendix C – Maps of Assisting Agencies and Host Organizations

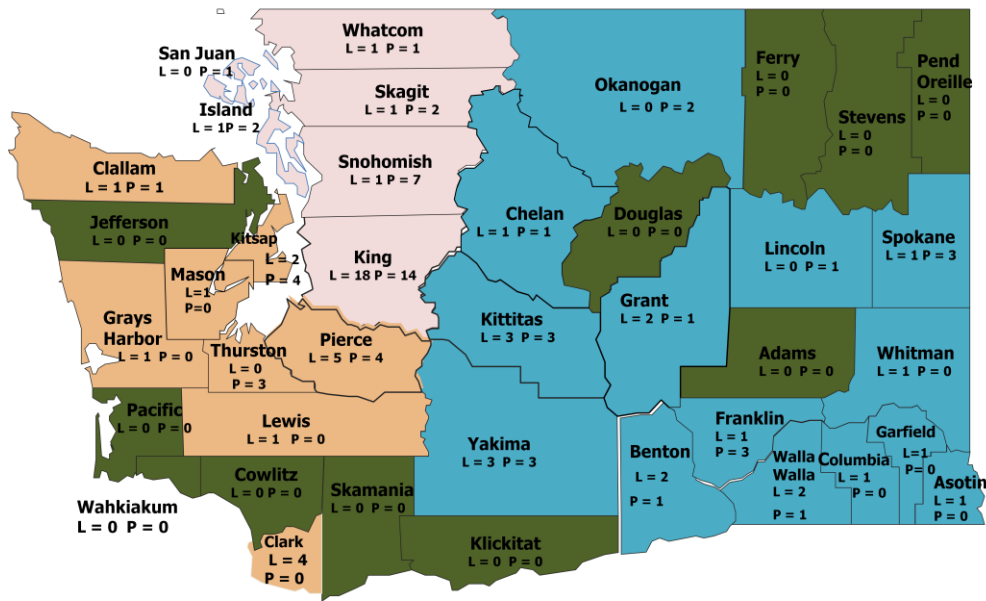
## WA Connection Host Organizations by County



Host Organizations: Community-based organizations that have computers or information for clients to use.  
 L = Limited Access: Available to the agency's clients only (Total = 292)  
 P = Public Access: Available to the public (Total = 216)

508 9/20/12

## WA Connection Assisting Agencies by County



Assisting Agencies: Community-Based Organizations that assist clients in applying for benefits.  
 L = Limited Access: Available to the agency's clients only (Total = 56)  
 P = Public Access: Available to the public (Total = 58)

114 9/20/12