

REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE

Washington Connection Benefit Portal

RCW 74.04.225

Dec. 1, 2024

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary.....	1
Reference 1 – Percentage of Client Benefit Accounts out of Caseloads	5
Reference 2 – Benefit Programs Available through Online Application.....	6
Reference 3 – Referral Links Available through Pre-screening Process.....	7
Reference 4 – Number of Community Partners by Organization Type.....	8
Reference 5 – Number of Partner Assisting Agencies over the Last Five Year.....	9
Reference 6 – Advisory Committee Memberships in 2024.....	10
Reference 7 – 2022-24 Washington Connection Strategic Plan.....	11

Executive Summary: Washington Connection Benefit Portal

This 14th annual report to the Washington State Legislature fulfills [RCW 74.04.225](#) for State Fiscal Year 2024. The 2010 Legislature enacted Engrossed Second Substitute House Bill 2782 to strengthen existing efforts of state agencies and partners by implementing an online benefit portal. The goal of the legislation was to streamline and expand online public access to a broad array of state, federal and local services and benefits.

Successfully implemented in December 2010 and enhanced thereafter, the [Washington Connection](#) benefit portal continues to serve as a resource for families and individuals in need of public assistance. It also serves as a tool for community organizations that help customers navigate available resources.

Outreach activities have been important in increasing awareness and online usage of the portal. Regular communications with other public agencies and community partners are essential for sharing the latest resources and information. As of July 2024, over 383,000 households have created Washington Connection Client Benefit Accounts (CBAs) to renew their benefits or update information online. This is an increase of 9% from 352,816 since July 2023 despite there being a Washington Connection-linked-program caseload decrease of 7% in that same time.

Background

As required by the Legislature, the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) deployed an integrated approach to providing online access to services and benefits as well as employment, training and education programs. Through strong partnerships with government agencies, community partners, community colleges and nonprofit organizations, DSHS continues to fulfill this requirement.

Washington Connection houses information about a wide variety of benefits and services, offers customers the option to apply for or renew services online (*Reference 2*) and provides a pre-screening process with referral links to additional services for which the applicant might be eligible (*Reference 3*).

Community Partnerships

Washington Connection continues to improve the tools and resources for community partners that are able to help customers apply for and renew benefits online. These tools include online registration, “Partner Account” and the “Client Search” feature. Resources for community partners include online tutorials, webinars, marketing materials, newsletters and consultations. Washington Connection has more than active 650 registered community partners throughout the state. These community partners work to improve residents’ access to services and benefits (*Reference 4 and Reference 5*).

Governance

The Department of Social and Health Services Secretary continues to serve as the executive sponsor of the Washington Connection Advisory Committee. The Advisory Committee is comprised of representatives from community-based organizations, state agencies, tribes, higher education and the Washington Health Benefit Exchange (*Reference 6*). While the committee guides the direction of Washington Connection's long-term goals and objectives, DSHS is responsible for daily operations of the portal, functionality enhancement, partnership development, public outreach and data analysis.

Strategic Plan

DSHS continues to implement objectives in the Washington Connection Strategic Plan approved by the Advisory Committee (*Reference 7*). We regularly review progress on initiatives related to these six strategic goals:

1. Improve the capability for customers to find what they need more quickly.
2. Improve portal functionality and usability for customers.
3. Support the Washington State Health & Human Services Enterprise Coalition's Integrated Eligibility & Enrollment Modernization Program.
4. Collaborate with partners to provide comprehensive services to customers.
5. Work with DSHS Community Services Office Administrators and partners to improve support to outlying communities.
6. Review customer/partner survey questions and responses, and take action as needed.

There will be a new Washington Connection Strategic Plan for 2025-2027.

References

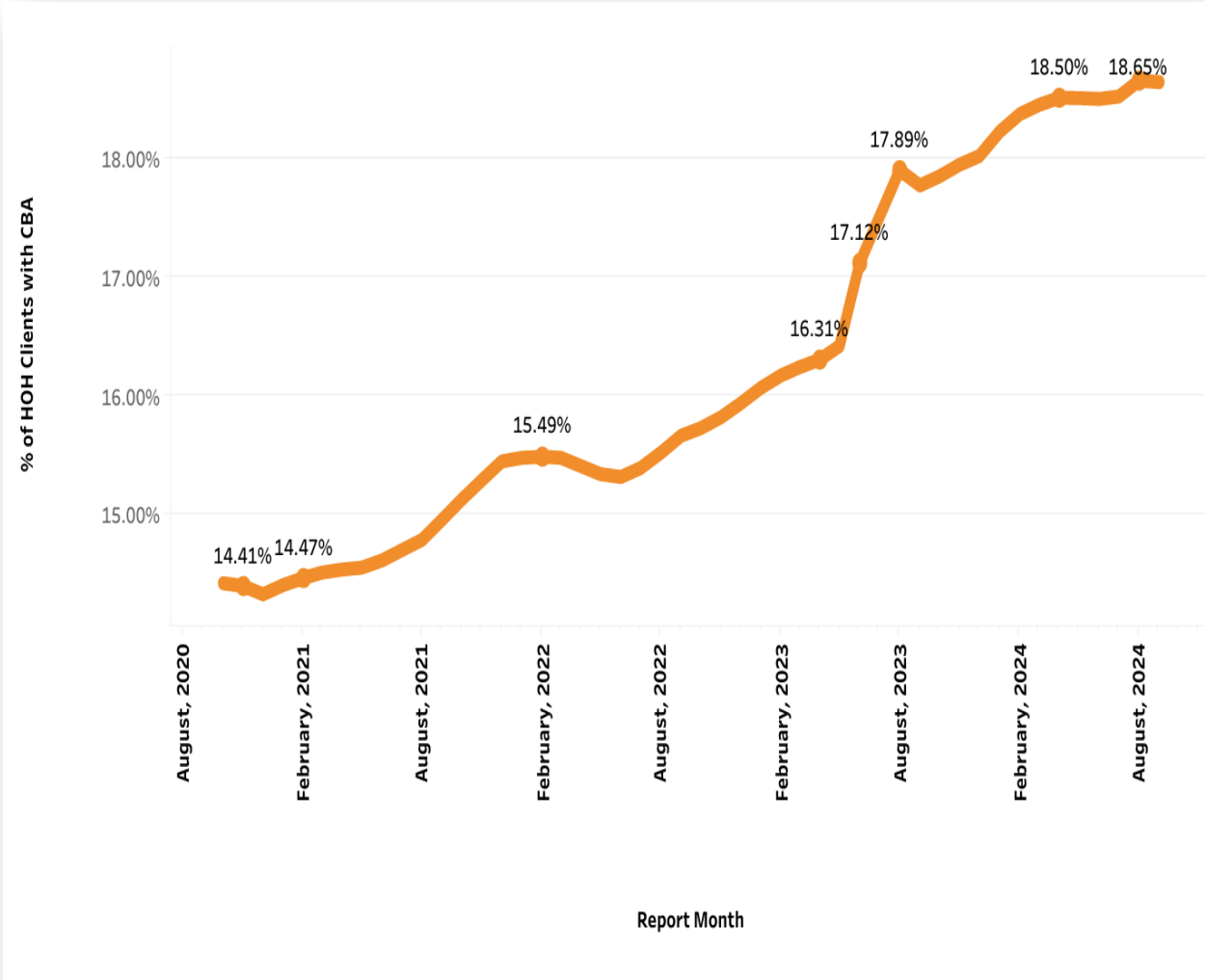
Additional updated information is available in the following References:

1. Total number of initiated Client Benefit Accounts.
2. Benefit programs available through online application.
3. Referral links available through pre-screening process.
4. Number of community partners by organization type.
5. Number of Assisting Partners over Recent Years
6. Advisory committee memberships in 2024.
7. 2022-24 Washington Connection strategic plan.

Reference 1: Percentage of Client Benefit Accounts out of Caseloads

The percentage of cases using CBAs had a net increase in state fiscal year 2024. More clients have been using this online feature to monitor their household benefits and continue services. Having a CBA provides clients with streamlined access to continued services without interruption as long as clients submit their mid-certification reviews and remain eligible for benefits.

(CBA utilization growth in the last four years)



Data Source: Tableau Data Report for Washington Connection as of Aug 2024.

Reference 2: Benefit Programs Available through Online Application*

Food Assistance

- Basic Food: Federally Funded Food Assistance.
- State Funded Food Assistance Program for Legal Immigrants.

Cash Assistance

- Temporary Assistance for Needy Family.
- Refugee Cash Assistance.
- State Family Assistance.
- Aged, Blind or Disabled Cash Assistance.
- Pregnant Women Assistance.
- Diversion Cash Assistance.
- Consolidated Emergency Assistance.
- State Supplemental Payment.
- Disaster Cash Assistance Program.

Medical Assistance

- Health care for people age 65+ and people who are blind or disabled.
- Medicare Savings Program.
- Mental Health Services (Including the Transitional Offenders Application Program. This is for people who are incarcerated and have mental illness, and will complete their prison sentences in short time.)

Child Care Subsidy Programs

- Working Connections Child Care.
- Seasonal Child Care.

Long Term Care Medical Assistance

- In-Home Long Term Care Services.
- Assisted Living Facility / Adult Family Home.
- Nursing Home.
- Hospice.
- Health care for Workers with Disabilities.

* The services listed above may appear on the pre-screening “Results” page if the applicant meets the criteria. The applicant may apply for any of these services online if selected.

Reference 3: Referral Links Available through Pre-screening Process*

Food Assistance

- [Free and Reduced-Price School Meals Program](#)
- [Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children](#)

Medical Assistance

- Washington Apple Health through [Washington Healthplanfinder](#)
- [Take Charge Family Planning Program](#)

Cash Assistance

- [Child Support Services](#)
- [Earned Income Tax Credit](#)

Services for Children

- [Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program or Head Start](#)

Employment, Education and Training

- [Start Next Quarter Free Educational Planning Workshops](#)
- [Federal Student Aid](#)

Veterans Benefits

- [Veterans Online Application](#)
- [My HealtheVet for Personal Health Record](#)

Tribal Services

- [Information on Tribal Government Services](#) for tribal members such as TANF, Child Support, Foster Care or other programs.

Housing and Utilities

- [Telephone Equipment for Deaf or Hard of Hearing](#)
- [Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program](#)
- [Housing Assistance](#)

Crime and Violence

- [Crime Victims Compensation Program](#)

* The services listed above may appear on the pre-screening “Results” page if the applicant meets the criteria. While the applicant cannot apply for these services on Washington Connection, they may visit these programs’ websites to find additional information.

Reference 4: Number of Community Partners by Organization Type

Number of Registered Community Partners by Organization Type by Region

Region	Region Code	Child Care	College or School	Community Organization	Faith Based	Government Agency	Library	Medical Provider	Tribe	Other	SNAP Outreach	Total
Region 1	1	0	13	55	2	10	4	35	4	2	22	147
Region 2	2	2	12	192	5	8	51	28	4	2	45	349
Region 3	3	0	1	60	1	9	31	11	5	5	29	152
Other (Outside WA)	NA	0	0	1	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	4
Statewide	Total	2	26	308	8	27	86	77	13	9	96	652

Data Source: Tableau Data Report for Washington Connection as of June. 30, 2024.

* Areas covered by each region:

Region 1: Counties in Central and Eastern Washington.

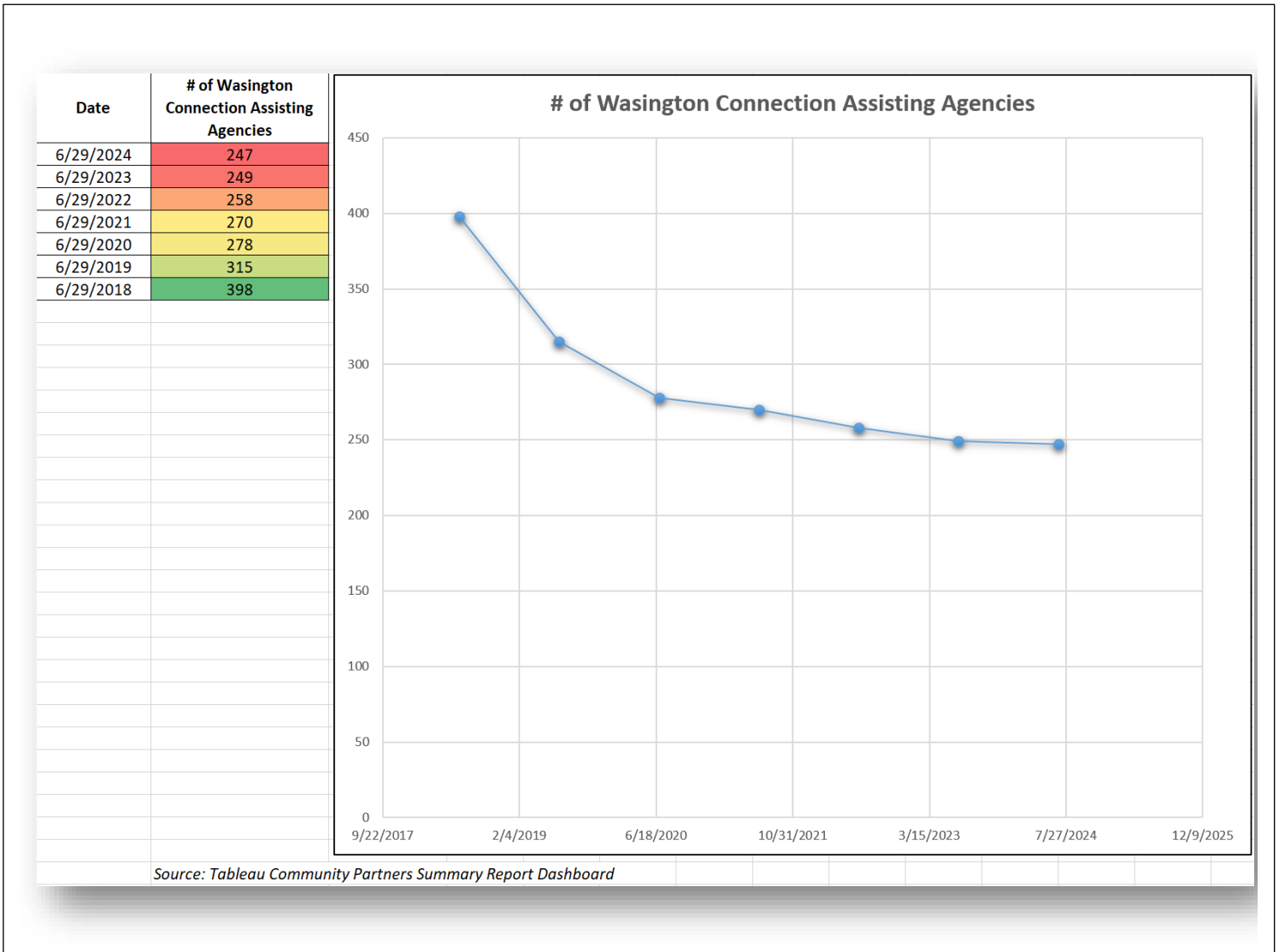
Region 2: Counties in the North Puget Sound area.

Region 3: Counties in the Olympia Peninsula, South Puget Sound and Southwest Washington.

Other: Counties outside the state border where partners also serve Washington residents.

Reference 5: Number of Assisting Partners over Recent Years

The Office of the Assistant Secretary is working with Community Services Division to re-strategize the Washington Connection Community Partnership Program in late 2024. A goal of this effort is to reverse the downward trend of registered partners seen in chart below.



Data Source: Tableau Data Report for Washington Connection as of June 29, 2024.

Definitions:

- * Assisting Agencies: Registered Community Partners that have signed Data Share Agreement and can use their Partner Account to submit online application and renewal on behalf of customers.

Reference 6: Washington Connection Advisory Committee Memberships in 2024

Officers			
Officer Position	Name	Title	Organization
Executive Sponsor	Jilma Meneses	Secretary	Department of Social and Health Services
Chair	Terry Redmon	Assistant Secretary	DSHS Economic Services Administration
Co-Chair	Jesus Bervis	Eligibility Manager	NeighborCare Health
Vice Co-Chair	Miranda Wilson	Programs Manager	Helping Hands Food Bank of Sedro Woolley

Committee Members		
Name	Title	Organization
(Pending) Molly Voris	Policy Advisor	Governor's Executive Policy Office
Amy Dobbins	Section Manager	Health Care Authority
Barbara Schultheiss	Executive Director	Lopez Island Family Resource Center
Cathy Kinnaman	Deputy Director of HQ Operations	DSHS Aging and Long-Term Support Administration
Dawn Whitman	Executive Director	St. Leo Food Connection
Elisha Smith-Marshall	Executive Director	Plateau Outreach Ministries
Gerald Daniels	Executive Director	R.I.S.E. Center of Hilltop
Jennifer Armstrong	Director	San Juan Island Family Resource Center
Jason Doty	Senior Information and Assistance supervisor	Kitsap County Aging and Long-Term Care
Jennifer Dellinger	Workforce Education Program Administrator	Washington State Board for Community & Technical Colleges
Kari Stevens	CLC Director	Aging & Long-Term Care of Eastern Washington
Kelly Aaron	Navigator Support Manager	Washington Health Benefit Exchange
Kelly Lindseth	Employment Connections Director	Employment Security Department
Marc Garcia	Chief Financial Officer	Triumph Treatment Services
Melissa Bless	Outreach Manager	Sea Mar Community Health Centers
Michelle DeBell	Business Analysis Manager	Department of Commerce
Molly Morris	Health Homes Program Manager	Rural Resources Community Action Agency
Murray Elbourne	CEO	Ameriability
Nicole Rose	Director of Eligibility and Provider Support	Department of Children, Youth and Families
Nora Wilson	Contact Center Mgr - Coordinated Access	Within Reach
Ron Messmer	Funding Case Manager	Greater Lakes Mental Healthcare
Shannon Williams	Community Access Administrator	DSHS Economic Services Administration
Stacy Kellogg	Director of Social Services	People for People
Stacy Malone Miller	Community Program Manager	Northwest Regional Council
Taunya Harnden	QIN TANF Caseworker	Quinalt Indian Nation
Theresa Slusher	Housing Stability Manager	DSHS Economic Services Administration
Zaneta Bukhtiyarov	Washington Connection IT Business Analyst	DSHS Technology Innovation Administration

Reference 7: 2022-2024 Washington Connection Strategic Plan

Goal 1: Improve the Capability for Customers to Find What They Need More Quickly

Key Measure: Washington Connection Customer Survey results. Ex: Question on the survey - Would you recommend this website to others trying to find services or benefits? As of August 2024, respondents answered 77% yes and 23% no. For 2023 this was 71% yes and 29% no.

Important context: A code freeze for Washington Connection updates was in place since 2021 and enhancements were limited to critical items only. Normal release updates resumed as of 10/15/2023.

Objectives	Strategies
<p>A. Create a chatbot that will follow the user from page to page answering the 10 most common question categories.</p>	<p>➤ The Washington Connection Automated Navigation and Discovery Assistant WANDA chatbot was launched on 6/5/24. This chatbot has had mostly favorable feedback from customers. 23% very good 14% good 8% avg 6% poor 8% very poor, with the open feedback on the poor and very poor mostly referring to another area of service delivery.</p>
<p>B. Ensure users view high-priority or immediate notifications first instead of scrolling through page navigation trees or Washington Connection subpages.</p>	<p>➤ Create capability to prioritize banner messages so the customers can see the high priority message first without scrolling through multiple pages. There is an open work request open for this enhancement waiting in DSHS Technology Innovation Administration’s queue.</p>

Goal 2: Improve Portal Functionality and Usability for Customers

Key Measure: Number of Client Benefit Accounts.

Results*: Increased the number of CBAs from 352,816 (July 31, 2023) to 383,360 (July 31, 2024); about 9% increase.

Objectives	Strategies
<p>A. Increase clients finding the correct service program using the "See If I Qualify" feature in Washington Connection.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The "See If I Qualify" feature in Washington Connection automatically defaults users to in-home services for long-term care clients. We will increase their ability to be better informed, and help users choose the correct service to allow for an accurate application assignment in the Barcode matrix. There is a work request open for this enhancement.
<p>B. Improve CBA logon error message. Including more information in the error message can help the customer have more success when they try to log onto their CBA.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ In the future, the logon error message should display the possible reasons why the customer's logon process cannot go through, and what the customer can do about it. There is currently a work request open for this enhancement.
<p>C. Reduce the number of clients who are not able to log in to their CBA.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Disassociate Secure Access Washington User IDs from CBAs that were never activated after six months. We are seeing that if a client has not finished the process within the six months, they no longer have the activation email from SAW or access to their previous email account. There are currently two work requests open for this enhancement.
<p>D. Simplify CBA registration process to reduce barriers in completing the registration.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The CBA registration process needs to be better streamlined to allow for easier access, in addition to expanding CBA access to a wider variety of DSHS clients. There is currently an open work request for this.
<p>E. Improve access for clients to provide needed eligibility documents electronically to the department.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ DSHS had an ongoing document upload project throughout 2023 and early 2024 that lost steam and had vendor challenges, however that has shifted to a new document upload project work request RITM0052333 with increased support from DSHS Technology Innovation Administration leadership as of Aug 2024.

<p>F. Redesign the website and make it more mobile-friendly to provide a better user experience for mobile users.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ New work coming in November 2024. The Washington Connection IT vendor has offered to do a facelift of the website as part of maintenance and operations. The facelift will modernize the look of the website as well as improve the user flow and overall usability of the website. ➤ Project Clarify user feedback project 2024 has made the page longer in aspect ratio so it conforms to the more vertical mobile devices better now. ➤ Per Google Analytics an average of 60% of users access the site per mobile. We also know that the community partners and other agencies utilize Washington Connection mostly through a desktop, leaving a higher than 60% mobile utilization rate for our applicant recipient customer.
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* Data Source: Tableau Data Report for Washington Connection.

Goal 3: Support Health and Human Services Coalition’s Integrated Eligibility & Enrollment (IE&E) Modernization Initiative

Key Measure: At this early stage in the platform life cycle, it is working alongside IE&E and aligning Washington Connection with its products/capabilities. Will revisit performance measure after IE&E products and user feedback on the products is available.

Objectives	Strategies
<p>A. Communicate updated information about the IE&E Modernization Program.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Share updates monthly with Review Board and quarterly with the Advisory Committee.
<p>B. Provide input and support to help in the planning, collaboration, coordination and implementation of IE&E Modernization.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Serve as a group member for the Human-Centered Design Community of Practice that will also work to inform product designs. ➤ Regular check-ins with IE&E staff. ➤ Did many compare-and-contrast exercises between CBA and IE&E to be able to share with impacted parties.
<p>C. Identify future changes that should be made to Washington Connection as a result of IE&E Modernization.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Plan to link IE&E products within Washington Connection for visitors of the site as well as its CBA as soon as products are available for client use. There is currently an open work request for this: “Establish connection between Washington Connection and E&E Status Tracker”

Goal 4: Collaborate with Partners to Provide Comprehensive Services to Customers

Key Measure: Expand the Transitional Offenders Application Program TOAP to increase the number of monthly TOAP applications. Between May 2023-May 2024 people who were completing prison sentences applied for an average of 114 programs every month via the TOAP program May 2022 - May 2023, people who were completing prison sentences applied for an average of 95 programs every month via the TOAP program.

Objectives	Strategies
A. Work with Department of Corrections to increase access to services for people who recently completed prison sentences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Participate in TOAP group led by the DSHS/DOC Service Alignment Administrator. ➤ Now that we have improved processes for ABD clients to apply, pushing toward food-only applications as DOC resources allow.
B. Work with tribal partners to improve tribal members' access to ESA services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Regularly communicate with Community Services Division Community Access Consultants and Community Access Administrator on updates about tribal activity in the community. ➤ Attend ESA Indian Policy Advisory Committee subcommittee meetings. ➤ Provided a Washington Connection presentation at an IPAC subcommittee 5/9/24. Also shared Advisory Committee nomination form and extended an offer for another tribal rep there.
C. Expand Washington Connection Community Partnership Program.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The Office of the Assistant Secretary is working with Community Services division to re-strategize the Washington Connection Community Partnership Program in late 2024. One of the goals of this work is to reverse the downward trend of registered partner loss in the last 5 years.

Goal 5: Work with CSOAs and Partners to Improve Support to Outlying Communities

Key Measure: Increasing the number of partners in under-represented counties. Determining these counties will take analysis from many different perspectives. Performance data will be available in the future and will require continued collaboration with CSD. We will be moving off this goal going into the next strategic plan. This work will be woven into another goal focused on better involving all DSHS staff.

Objectives	Strategies
A. Identify outlying communities in need of support from additional Host Organizations and Assisting Agencies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Run and present monthly reports on Community Partner changes by region and county to better monitor local trends of partners. ➤ Use U.S. Census data on population, income and poverty to add relevant context to local partner necessity and prioritization of outreach efforts. ➤ Work with CSD to re-launch community partnership program with new focus.

<p>B. Increase number of Host Organizations and Assisting Agencies in communities located 25 or more air miles from their designated CSO.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Coordinate with Access Consultants and CSOAs in outreach efforts. ➤ Work with new CSD Community Access Administrator and Community Access Consultants in outreach strategy in these areas.
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Goal 6: Review Customer/Partner Survey Questions and Responses, and Take Actions as Needed.

Key Measure: Washington Connection Partner Survey site performance. Ex: Question on the survey – Would you recommend this website to other community organizations that provide benefits to their customers. As of August 2023, respondents answered 82% yes and 18% no.

Objectives	Strategies
<p>A. Make adjustments to survey questions as needed so the questions remain relevant.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Review survey results. ➤ Work with the CSD Community Access Administrator and Washington Connection Business Analyst to update questions based on feedback they receive from partners and access consultants. ➤ Leverage the current question in the survey offering a follow-up with the partner and monitor if there are common follow-up concerns that are better modeled as another question.
<p>B. Review gaps mentioned in survey responses and identify solutions to address the gaps as needed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Work with CSD Community Access Administrator to address gaps. ➤ Review the survey no less than every six months. ➤ Worked with DSHS Technology Innovation Administration this past year to create a new report of client referral and feedback to better acquire client reaction and marketing of Washington Connection.
<p>C. Create a dedicated Community Partnership Program survey to best serve our current and future partners.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ We created a new dedicated Community Partnership Program survey. This is different than the ongoing Partner audience website focused survey. It's had healthy response rate so far with 93 responses received from just one email request. ➤ There are two work requests with DSHS Technology Innovation Administration on linking this survey to the home page on Washington Connection. This survey was added to a Washington Connection partner subpage in 8/2024. ➤ 83% of respondents on the new survey said being a Washington Connection partner benefitted their organization.

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