Washington State Department of Social and Health Services

Transforming Lives

REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE

Washington Connection Benefit Portal

RCW 74.04.225

December 1, 2022

Washington State
Department of Social
& Health Services
Transforming lives

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Executive Summary: Washington Connection Benefit Portal

This is the twelfth annual report in fulfillment of [RCW 74.04.225](#) for FY 2022. The 2010 Washington State Legislature enacted legislation "Engrossed Second Substitute House Bill 2782" to strengthen existing efforts of state agencies and partners by implementing an online benefit portal. The goal was to streamline and expand online public access to a broad array of state, federal and local services and benefits. For FY 2022 there was no clear link that Washington Connection Utilization was linked to federal funding.

Successfully implemented in December 2010 and enhanced thereafter, the [Washington Connection](#) benefit portal continues to serve as a great 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.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Washington Connection was able to make Disaster Cash Assistance Program accessible online, so that families affected by these crises can quickly apply for these services online and receive critically needed help as soon as possible.

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 in sharing the latest resources and information. As of August 2022, over 314,575 households have created their Washington Connection Client Benefit Accounts (CBAs) to renew their benefits or update information online, which is an increase of 11% from 284,506 since August 2021 *(See Figure 1)*.

Background

As required by the Legislature, the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) deployed an integrated approach in 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 non-profit organizations, DSHS continues to fulfill this requirement.

Washington Connection shares information about a wide variety of benefits and services, offers customers the option to apply for or renew services online *(See Figure 2)*, and provides a pre-screening process with referral links to additional services for which the applicant might be eligible *(See Figure 3)*. These features were designed to remove barriers for families and individuals so they can successfully navigate the website and seek the services they need.

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. Currently there are 670 registered community partners throughout the state, working to improve local residents' access to services and benefits *(See Figure 4 and Figure 5)*.

Governance

The Secretary of the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) continues to serve as the executive sponsor of the Washington Connection Advisory Committee. The Advisory Committee comprises representatives from community-based organizations, state agencies, tribes, higher education, and the Health Benefit Exchange *(See Figure 6)*. While the Advisory 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 continued to implement objectives in the Washington Connection Strategic Plan approved by the Advisory Committee *(See Figure 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 Health and Human Services Coalition's Integrated Eligibility & Enrollment Modernization Initiative.
4. Collaborate with Partners to Provide Comprehensive Services to Customers.
5. Work with DSHS Customer Service Office Administrators (CSOAs) and Partners to Improve Support to Outlying Communities.
6. Review Customer/Partner Survey Questions and Responses, and Take Actions as Needed.

Figures

Additional update information is available in the following figures:

1. Total Number of Active CBAs
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 Community Partners by County
6. Advisory Committee Memberships in 2022
7. 2020-2022 Washington Connection Strategic Plan

Figure 1: Total Number of Active Client Benefit Accounts

There was a net increase in the number of total CBAs in Year 2022. More clients have been using this online feature to monitor their household benefits, renew services, or update household information if they needed to report changes of circumstances. The CBA functionality provides clients with streamlined access to continued services without interruption as long as the clients submit eligibility reviews before expiration date and remain eligible.

(CBA growth in the last five years)
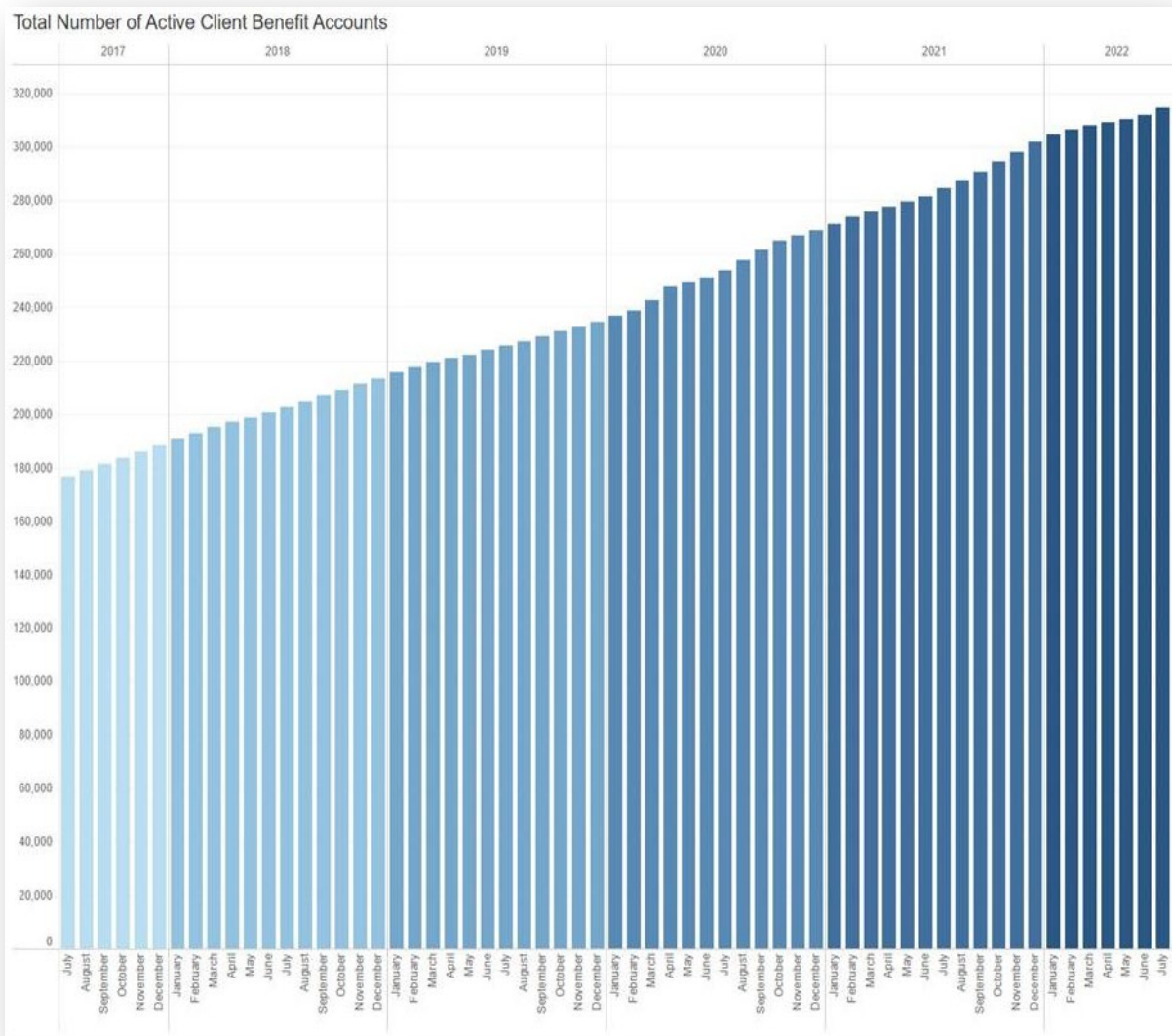
Data Source: Tableau Data Report for Washington Connection, as of July 31, 2022

Figure 2: Benefit Programs Available through Online Application*

Food Assistance

(The DSHS eligibility worker determines programs for which the client is eligible.)

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

Cash Assistance

(The DSHS eligibility worker determines programs for which the client is eligible.)

- 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 individuals age 65+, and persons who are blind or disabled
- Medicare Savings Program
- Mental Health Services (for mentally ill prison inmates soon to be released)

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
- Healthcare for Workers with Disabilities
- Tailored Support for Older Adults

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* 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.

** The Department of Children, Youth and Families determines the applicant's eligibility for Child Care Subsidy Programs after receiving and reviewing application data from DSHS.

Figure 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](#)
- [Assistance for Foster Youth](#)

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](#)

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* 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.

Figure 4: Number of Community Partners by Organization Type

Number of Registered Community Partners by Organization Type by Region

Region	Child Care	College or School	Community Organization	Faith Based	Government Agency	Library	Medical Provider	Tribe	Other	SNAP Outreach	Total
Region 1	1	13	58	2	12	4	33	3	2	23	151
Region 2	2	12	181	5	25	51	28	5	0	46	355
Region 3	0	12	56	2	9	31	13	7	1	30	161
Other (Outside WA)	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	3
Statewide	3	37	296	9	46	86	76	15	3	99	670

Data Source(s): WaCon

Data Source: Tableau Data Report for Washington Connection, as of July 31, 2022.

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* Areas covered by each region:

Region 1: Counties in the Central and Eastern Washington

Region 2: Counties in the North Puget Sound area

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

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

Figure 5: Number of Community Partners by County

Number of Assisting Agencies* / Number of Host Organizations**
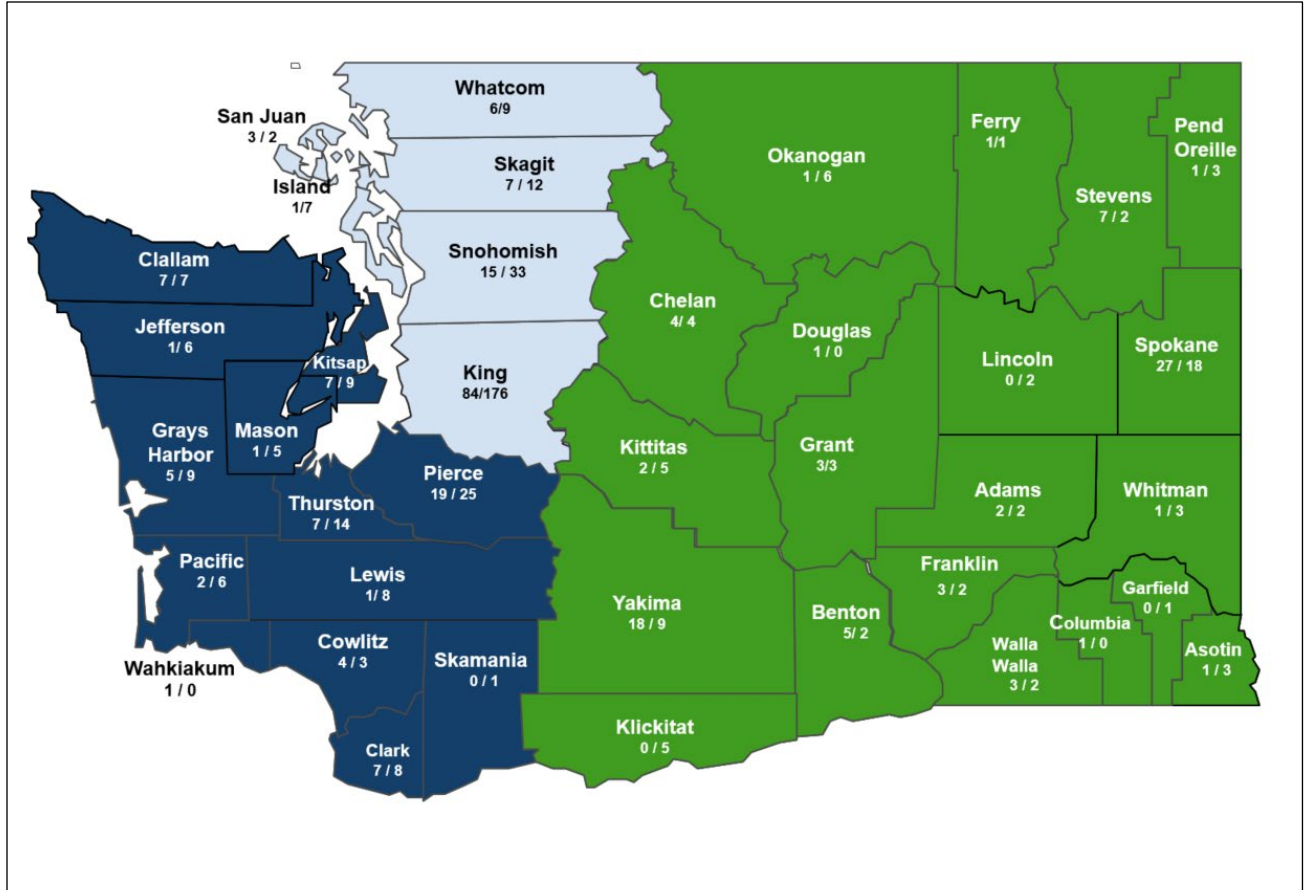
Data Source: Tableau Data Report for Washington Connection, as of July 31, 2022

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Definitions:

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

** Host Organizations: Registered Community Partners that can provide customers with access to computers and information about Washington Connection.

Figure 6: Advisory Committee Memberships in 2022

Officers			
Officer Position	Name	Title	Organization
Executive Sponsor	Jilma Meneses	Secretary	DSHS
Chair	Tony Bowie	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
Past Co-Chair	Stacy Mills	Family Assistance Manager	Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe

Committee Members		
Name	Title	Organization
Kelly Aaron	Navigator Support Manager	WA Health Benefit Exchange
Jennifer Armstrong	Director	San Juan Island Family Resource Center
Amber Leaders	Sr. Policy Advisor	Governor's Executive Policy Office
Jesus Bervis	Eligibility Manager	NeighborCare Health
Melissa Bless	Outreach Manager	Sea Mar Community Health Centers
Jason Doty	Senior Services Manager	Kitsap County Aging and Long Term Care
Gerald Daniels	Executive Director	R.I.S.E. Center of Hilltop
Michelle DeBell	Business Analysis Manager	Department of Commerce
Jennifer Dellinger	Workforce Education Program Administrator	Washington State Board for Community & Technical Colleges
Dawn Whitman	Executive Director	St. Leo Food Connection
Marc Garcia	Chief Financial Officer	Triumph Treatment Services
Cathy Kinnaman	Deputy Director of HQ Operations	DSHS Aging and Long Term Support Administration, Home and Community Services
Kelly Lindseth	Employment Connections Director	Employment Security Department
Amy Dobbins	Section Manager	Health Care Authority
Mary McHale	Associate Director of Communications	Washington Health Benefit Exchange
Gizachew Manahle	Family Empowerment Program Manager	Refugee Women's Alliance
Ron Messmer	Funding Case Manager	Greater Lakes Mental Healthcare
Nicole Rose	Director of Eligibility and Provider Support	Department of Children, Youth and Families
Maricruz Sanchez	Manager, Healthy Connections	Within Reach
Barbara Schultheiss	Executive Director	Lopez Island Family Resource Center
Elisha Smith-Marshall	Executive Director	Plateau Outreach Ministries
Kari Stevens	CLC Director	Aging & Long-Term Care of Eastern Washington
Ray White	Director	Community-Minded Enterprises
Miranda Wilson	Programs Manager	Helping Hands Food Bank of Sedro Woolley

Figure 7: 2022-2024 Washington Connection Strategic Plan

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

Key Measure: New. Washington Connection Customer Survey results. Ex: Question on the survey - Would you recommend this website to other community organizations that provide benefits to their customers. As of July 2022, that was 80.5% yes and 19.5% no

Objectives	Strategies
A. Enhance online application to accept Disaster SNAP application in areas approved for disaster assistance.	➢ Adding this program to Washington Connection application. Historically D-SNAP required face to face interviews. AWR 570361 open for this.
B. Modify homepage to make sign-on and create account functions more readily available.	➢ Functions such as; Login, Create Account, Complete pending application with Temporary Access code, or access their CBA should be readily available on the homepage or website page templates for easier access by users. AWR 460246 open for this.
C. Ensure users view high priority or immediate notifications first instead of scrolling though page navigation trees or Wacon subpages.	➢ Create capability to prioritize banner messages so the customers can see the high priority message first without scrolling through multiple pages. AWR 570350.

Goal 2: Improve Portal Functionality and Usability for Customers

Key Measure: Number of CBAs

Results*: Increased from 284,506 (July 31, 2021) to 314,575 (July 31, 2022); about 11% increase. July 2020-July 2021 also had an 11% net increase.

Objectives	Strategies
A. Increase clients finding the correct service program using the "See If I Qualify" feature in Washington Connection.	➢ The "See If I Qualify" feature in Washington Connection is confusing for applicants and automatically defaults them to In-Home Services for LTC clients. We will increase their ability to be better informed, and choose the correct service and online application program to allow for an accurate application assignment in the Barcode matrix. AWR 385849 open for this.

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.	➤ 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. AWR 519240 open for this.
C. Reduce the number of clients who are not able to log in to their CBA.	➤ Disassociate SAW User IDs from CBAs that were never activated after 6 months. We are seeing that if a client hasn't finished the process within the 6 months, they no longer have the activation email from SAW or access to their previous email account. AWRs 390056 and 391843 open for this.
D. Simplify CBA registration process to reduce barriers in completing the registration.	➤ 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. AWR 460249 open for this.
E. Improve access for clients to provide needed eligibility documents electronically to the department.	➤ Add a feature to allow applicants to upload and submit images of supporting documents. AWR 129061 open for this.
F. Redesign the website and make it more mobile friendly to provide a better user experience for mobile users.	➤ The CBA main screens should be modified to present users with a Dashboard that informs them of action items needed and a better way to find and locate information. AWR 387994 open for this.

* Data Source: Tableau Data Report for Washington Connection.
** These initiatives have been completed.

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 staying on time with the Collaborator Framework project and 14 IE&E Product releases. Will revisit performance measure after products and feedback on the products are available.

Objectives	Strategies
A. Communicate update information about the IE&E Modernization Initiative.	➢ Share updates monthly with Review Board and quarterly with the Advisory Committee.
B. Provide input and support to help in the planning, collaboration, coordination, and implementation of IE&E Modernization.	➢ Leading the Design Collaborator Framework for the IE&E Products. ➢ Serving as a group member for the Human Centered Design Community of Practice that will also work to inform Product Designs.
C. Identify future changes that should be made to Washington Connection as a result of IE&E Modernization.	➢ Using the findings from the Design Collaborator Framework for the IE&E Products to inform Washington Connection design interventions in the interim.

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

> Key Measure: Expand the Transitional Offenders Application Program (TOAP) to more services, as well as increase the number of monthly TOAP applications. 57 applications for the latest month available for reporting (May 2022)

Objectives	Strategies
A. Work with DOC to increase newly incarcerated persons' family members' awareness of DSHS programs and services.	➢ Leading the TOAP expansion group in the interim. ➢ Collaborating with the new DSHS/DOC Service Alignment manager after they are onboarded.
B. Work with Tribal partners to improve Tribal members' access to ESA services.	➢ Regularly communicate with CSD Community Access Consultants and Community Access Administrator on updates about tribal activity in the community. ➢ Attend ESA IPAC subcommittee.

Goal 5: Work with CSOAs and Partners to Improve Support to Outlying Communities
Key Measure: Increasing the number of partners in under-partner-represented counties. Determining these counties will take analysis from many different perspectives with new collaborators. Performance data will be available in the future.

Objectives	Strategies
A. Identify outlying communities in need of support from additional Host Organizations and Assisting Agencies.	➤ Review data with CSOAs to identify target areas. ➤ Run and present monthly reports on Community Partner changes by region and county to better monitor local trends of partners. ➤ Use Census data on population, income and poverty to add relevant context to local partner necessity and prioritization of outreach efforts.
B. Increase number of Host Organizations and Assisting Agencies in communities located 25 or more air miles from their designated CSO.	➤ 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.

Goal 6: Review Customer/Partner Survey Questions and Responses, and Take Actions as Needed

Key Measure: Washington Connection Partner Survey performance. Ex: Question on the survey - Would you recommend this website to other community organizations that provide benefits to their customers. As of July 2022, that was 81.4% yes and 18.6% no

Objectives	Strategies
A. Make adjustments to survey questions as needed so the questions remain relevant.	➢ Review survey results ➢ Work with CSD Community Access Administrator 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.
B. Review gaps mentioned in survey responses and identify solutions to address the gaps as needed.	➢ Work with CSD Community Access Administrator addressing gaps. ➢ Review the survey no more than every six months.

* Data Source: Tableau Data Report for Washington Connection.
** These initiatives have been complete