

REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE

Washington Connection Benefit Portal

RCW 74.04.225

December 1, 2020

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<https://www.washingtonconnection.org>

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The Department of Social and Health Services does not discriminate and provides equal access to its programs and services for all persons without regard to race, color, gender, religion, creed, marital status, national origin, sexual orientation, age, veteran’s status, or the presence of any physical, sensory or mental disability.

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

Executive Summary: Washington Connection Benefit Portal

This is the tenth annual report in fulfillment of [RCW 74.04.225](#) for FY 2020. 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.

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 this year’s COVID-19 pandemic and wildfire crises, Washington Connection was able to make Pandemic EBT Program (for K-12 children eligible for free and reduced price school meals) and 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 2020, over 256,248 households have created their Washington Connection Client Benefit Accounts to renew their benefits or update information online, which is an increase of 13% from 226,264 since August 2019 (*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 can 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, training webinars, marketing materials, newsletters, and consultations. Currently there are 685 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

The Advisory Committee approved the 2019-2021 Washington Connection Strategic Plan in January 2019 (*See Figure 7*), and received updates on initiatives related to these four strategic goals: (1) improve the capability to update website information in a timely manner; (2) improve portal functionality and usability for online users; (3) enhance community partnerships; and (4) improve communication with staff, partners and clients.

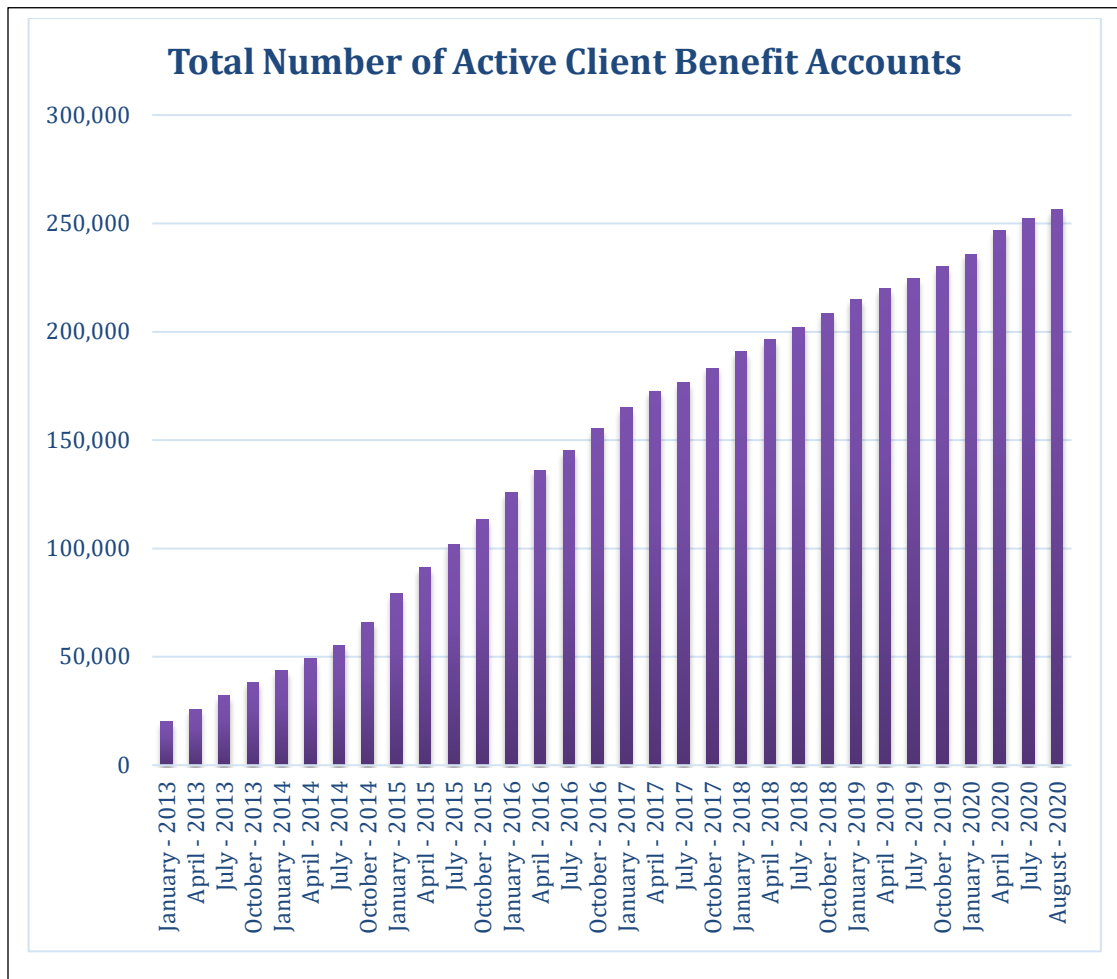
Figures

Additional update information is available in the following figures:

1. Total Number of Active 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 Community Partners by County
6. Advisory Committee Membership in 2020
7. 2019-2021 Washington Connection Strategic Plan

Figure 1: Total Number of Active Client Benefit Accounts

There was a significant increase in the number of Client Benefit Accounts in Year 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. A higher percentage of 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 Client Benefit Account functionality provides clients with streamlined access to continued services without interruption as long as the clients remain eligible.



Data Source: Cognos Data Report for Washington Connection, as of August 31, 2020

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
- Pandemic EBT for Children Eligible for Free or Reduced Price School Meals

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 Coverage – for individuals 65 or older, 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

* 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](#)
- [Vocation Rehabilitation Assistance](#)
- [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.

Figure 4: Number of Community Partners by Organization Type

Number of Registered Community Partners by Organization Type by Region

Region*	College Or School	Community Organization	Government Agency	Library	Medical Provider	Tribe	SNAP Outreach	Child Care	Faith Based	Total
1	16	56	13	4	53	3	23	1	1	170
2	14	168	21	51	38	2	45	3	4	346
3	12	61	10	31	15	6	30	0	1	166
Other	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	3
Statewide	42	286	44	86	108	11	98	4	6	685

Data Source: Cognos Data Report for Washington Connection, as of June 30, 2020.

Total Number of Community Partners by Region*:	
Region 1:	170
Region 2:	346
Region 3:	166
Other:	3
<hr/>	
Total:	685

* Areas covered by each region:

Region 1: Counties in the Central and Eastern Washington

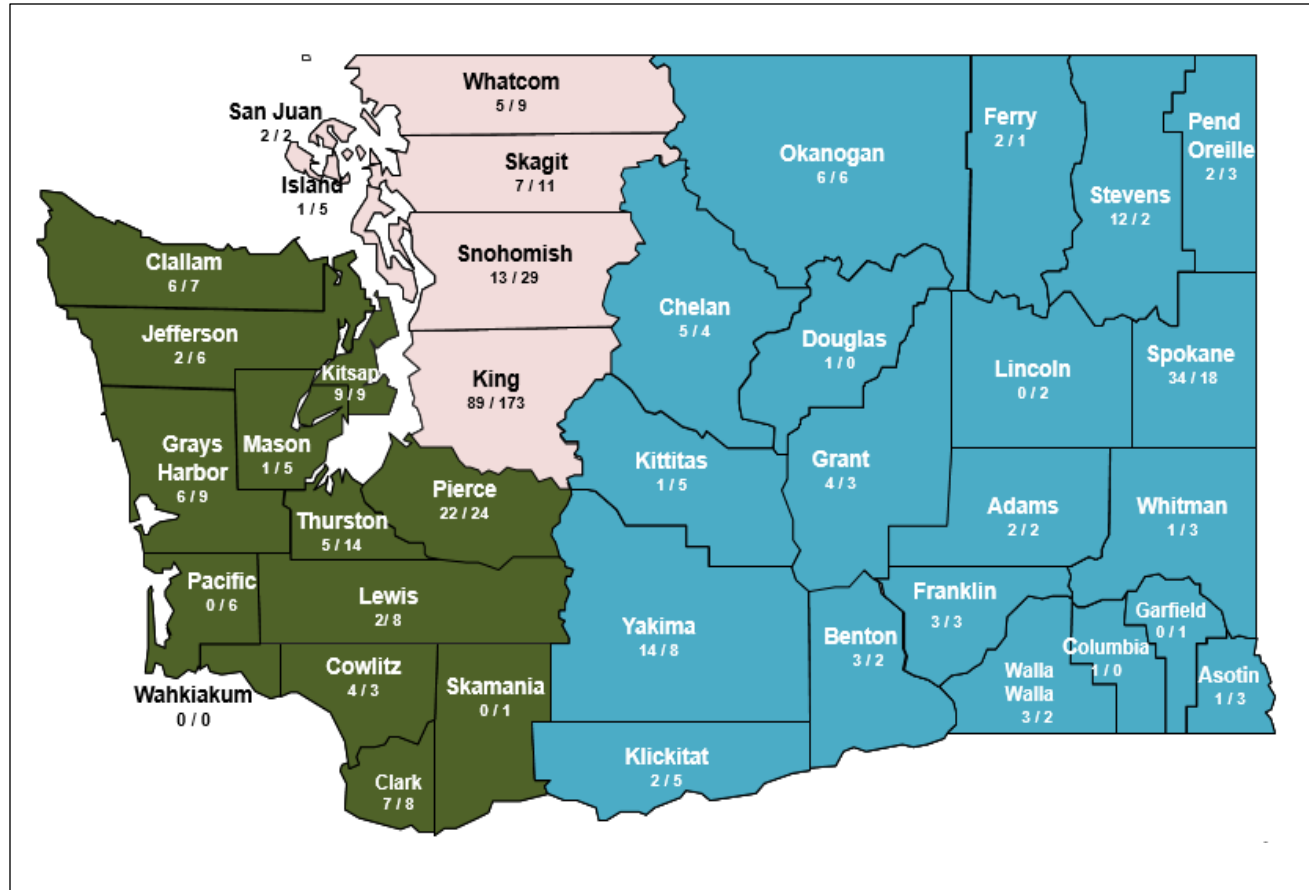
Region 2: Counties in the North Puget Sound area

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: Cognos Data Report for Washington Connection, as of June 30, 2020.

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 Membership in 2020

Officers			
Officer Position	Name	Title	Organization
Executive Sponsor	Cheryl Strange	Secretary	DSHS
Chair	David Stillman	Assistant Secretary	DSHS, Economic Services Administration
Co-Chair	Stacy Kellogg	Director of Social Services	People for People
Vice Co-Chair	Stacy Mills	Family Assistance Manager	Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe

Committee Members		
Name	Title	Organization
Jim Baumgart	Policy Advisor	Governor's Executive Policy Office
Jesus Bervis	Eligibility Manager	NeighborCare Health
Melissa Bless	Outreach Manager	Sea Mar Community Health Centers
Jennifer Calvin-Myers	Senior Services Manager	Kitsap County Aging and Long Term Care
Michelle DeBell	Business Analysis Manager	Department of Commerce
Jennifer Dellinger	Workforce Education Program Administrator	Washington State Board for Community & Technical Colleges
Kevin Glackin-Coley	Executive Director	St. Leo Food Connection
Elizabeth Guerra	Community Services Director	Blue Mountain Action Council
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
Taylor Linke	Assistant Director	Health Care Authority, Medicaid Eligibility and Community Support
Mary McHale	Associate Director of Communications	Washington Health Benefit Exchange
Ron Messmer	Funding Case Manager	Greater Lakes Mental Healthcare
Molly Morris	Financial Manager	Coulee Medical Center
Lola Philips	Director, Community Living Connections	Aging & Long Term Care of Eastern Washington
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
May Segle	Executive Director	Entiat Valley Community Services & Food Bank
Ray White	Director	Community-Minded Enterprises

Figure 7: 2019-2021 Washington Connection Strategic Plan

Goal 1: Improve the Capability to Update Website Information in a Timely Manner

Key Measure: Number of Client Benefit Accounts

Results*: Increased from 226,264 (August 2019) to 256,248 (August 2020); about 13% increase

Objectives	Strategies
A. Offer six new online tutorials in English and Spanish that are more current and accessible to all users	➤ Work with Customer Support and DSHS Communications Office to create new tutorials compatible with all devices**
B. Notify online customers about maintenance hours as well as urgent announcements in near real-time	➤ Post the information banner on the homepage to display maintenance hours and short announcements**
C. Keep the Profile Management System current with data of active Assisting Agency users	➤ Deactivate Assisting Agency users after 180 days of non-use to keep user data current in the Profile Management System**

Goal 2: Improve Portal Functionality and Usability for Online Users

Key Measure: Number of Client Benefit Accounts

Results*: Increased from 226,264 (August 2019) to 256,248 (August 2020); about 13% increase

Objectives	Strategies
A. Provide easy access to Client Benefit Account (CBA) with clear information on homepage and CBA pages	➤ Identify components of desired improvement and implement requirements for the new features
B. Enhance Long Term Care application to help applicants make better decisions during online application	➤ Improve online application to incorporate questions that better reflect on Long Term Care eligibility requirements
C. Enable clients to scan, upload, and submit supporting documents electronically	➤ Analyze and implement business and technical requirements that connect Washington Connection with document imaging system, Barcode, and ACES

* Data Source: Cognos Data Report for Washington Connection.

** These initiatives have been completed.

Goal 3: Enhance Community Partnerships

Key Measure: Percent of Assisting Agencies that have submittal activities each month

Results*: Increased from 30.64% (2019 annual average) to 33.21% (2020 annual average as of June 30, 2020)

Objectives	Strategies
A. Build on existing tribal partnerships to identify capacity for further connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Work with CSOs to determine where additional Access Consultant focus is needed; record and track outreach efforts with tribal partners ➤ Work with regional tribal liaison to better collaborate with tribal partners in an effort to improve their members’ access to ESA services
B. Increase the number of Assisting Agencies actively using Washington Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Define “active” and determine regional and statewide baseline** ➤ Connect with Probation Offices to share information about DSHS programs and Washington Connection (ongoing)
C. Increase number of Host and Assisting Agencies in communities located 25 or more air miles from their designated CSO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Identify outlying communities and determine need for additional Host and Assisting Agencies (ongoing)**

Goal 4: Improve Communication with Staff, Partners and Clients

Key Measure: Percent of Assisting Agencies that have submittal activities each month

Results*: Increased from 30.64% (2019 annual average) to 33.21% (2020 annual average as of June 30, 2020)

Objectives	Strategies
A. Improve Assisting Agencies’ adherence to the data share agreements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Send quarterly “Did You Know” email to Assisting Agencies highlighting different facets of the data share agreement (ongoing)**
B. Update client/partner marketing material to promote better understanding of access options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Review current Client Benefit Account brochure and update to provide a clear, concise and consistent brochure** ➤ Create a one-page summary of the benefits of being an Assisting Agency

* Data Source: Cognos Data Report for Washington Connection.

** These initiatives have been completed.

