

**REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE**

**Washington Connection Benefit Portal**

RCW 74.04.225

December 1, 2019

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary.....	1
Figure 1 – Total Number of Client Benefit Accounts.....	3
Figure 2 – Benefit Programs Available through Online Application.....	4
Figure 3 – Referral Links Available through Pre-screening Process.....	5
Figure 4 – Number of Community Partners by Organization Type.....	6
Figure 5 – Number of Community Partners by County.....	7
Figure 6 – Advisory Committee Membership in 2019.....	8
Figure 7 – 2019-2021 Washington Connection Strategic Plan.....	9

*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 ninth annual report in fulfillment of [RCW 74.04.225](#) for FY 2019. 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 quarterly thereafter, the [Washington Connection](#) benefit portal received national recognition through the 2012 Bright Ideas Award from the Ash Center at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government.

As the portal expands each year, more assistance programs become accessible for families and individuals to explore or apply online. Evidence shows that an integrated approach critically offers families and individuals in need more streamlined access to multiple services that could prevent further crises. Ongoing enhancements also offer better features to improve their experience online.

Active marketing and outreach have helped increase awareness and online usage of the portal. Regular cross-agency communications are essential in sharing the latest information. As of July 2019, over 224,608 households have created their Washington Connection Client Benefit Accounts to renew their benefits or update information online, which is an increase of 11% since July 2018 (*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, Washington Connection 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 provides tools and resources for community partners that can help their customers apply for and renew benefits online. These tools include the online secure partner registration, Partner Account, and the “Client Search” feature. Resources include online tutorials, training webinars, marketing materials, newsletters, and consultations. Currently there are over 700 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) serves 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.

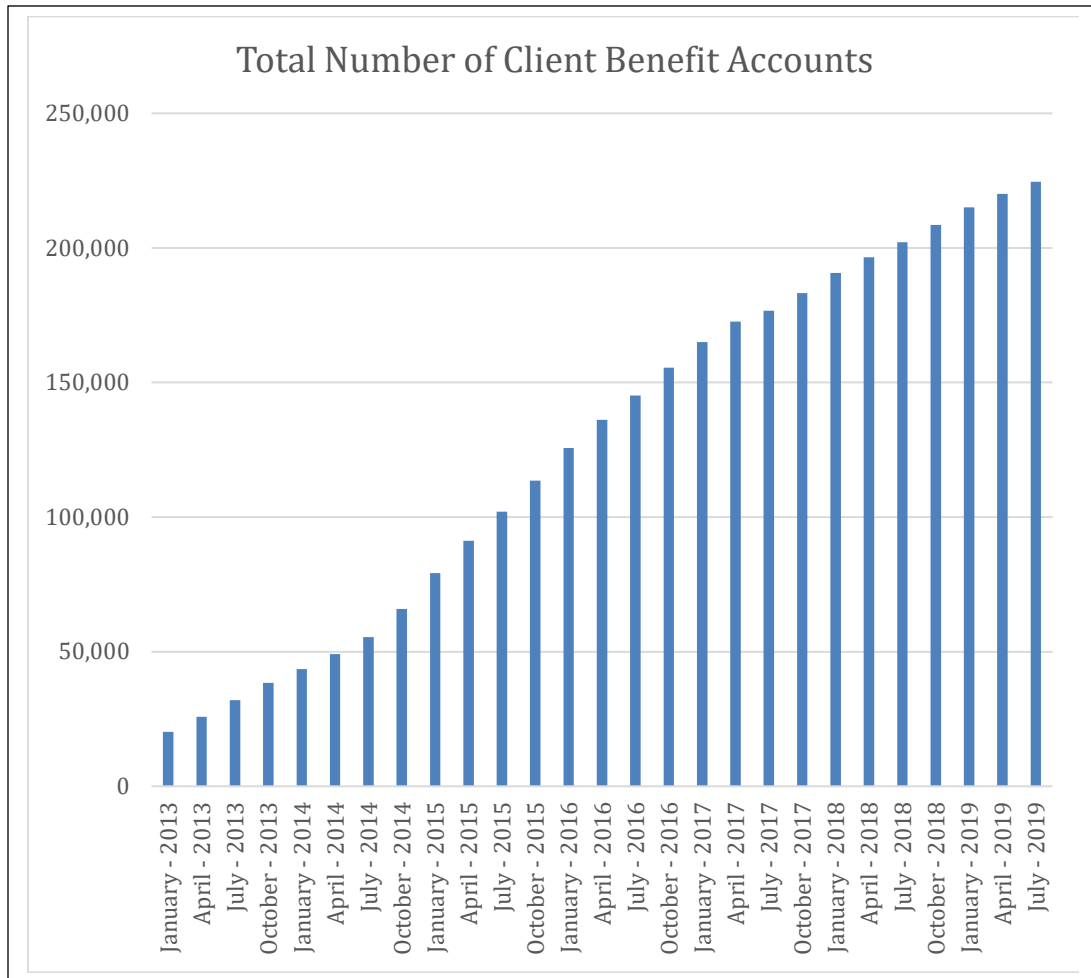
## **Figures**

Additional update information is available in the following figures:

1. Total Number of 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 2019
7. 2019-2021 Washington Connection Strategic Plan

## Figure 1: Total Number of Client Benefit Accounts

The number of Client Benefit Accounts in the past seven years continues to increase as more and more individuals and families are using this online feature to monitor their benefit history, renew services, or update information. The Client Benefit Account 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 July 31, 2019

## **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

### **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

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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 eligibility of applicants 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](#)

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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 online, they may visit these programs’ websites to find more 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
<b>1</b>	15	60	14	4	67	6	22	0	1	189
<b>2</b>	12	166	21	51	39	3	50	3	2	348
<b>3</b>	14	69	10	30	19	7	30	0	1	180
<b>Other*</b>	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	3
<b>Statewide</b>	41	296	45	85	127	16	102	3	4	720

\* Other agencies that are located outside of Washington state border but serving Washington state residents.  
(As of June 14, 2019)

Data Source: Cognos Data Report for Washington Connection, as of June 14, 2019.

#### Total Number of Community Partners by Region\*:

Region 1: 189

Region 2: 348

Region 3: 180

Other: 3

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Total: 720

\* Areas covered by each region:

Region 1: Counties in the Central and Eastern Washington

Region 2: Counties in the North Puget Sound area

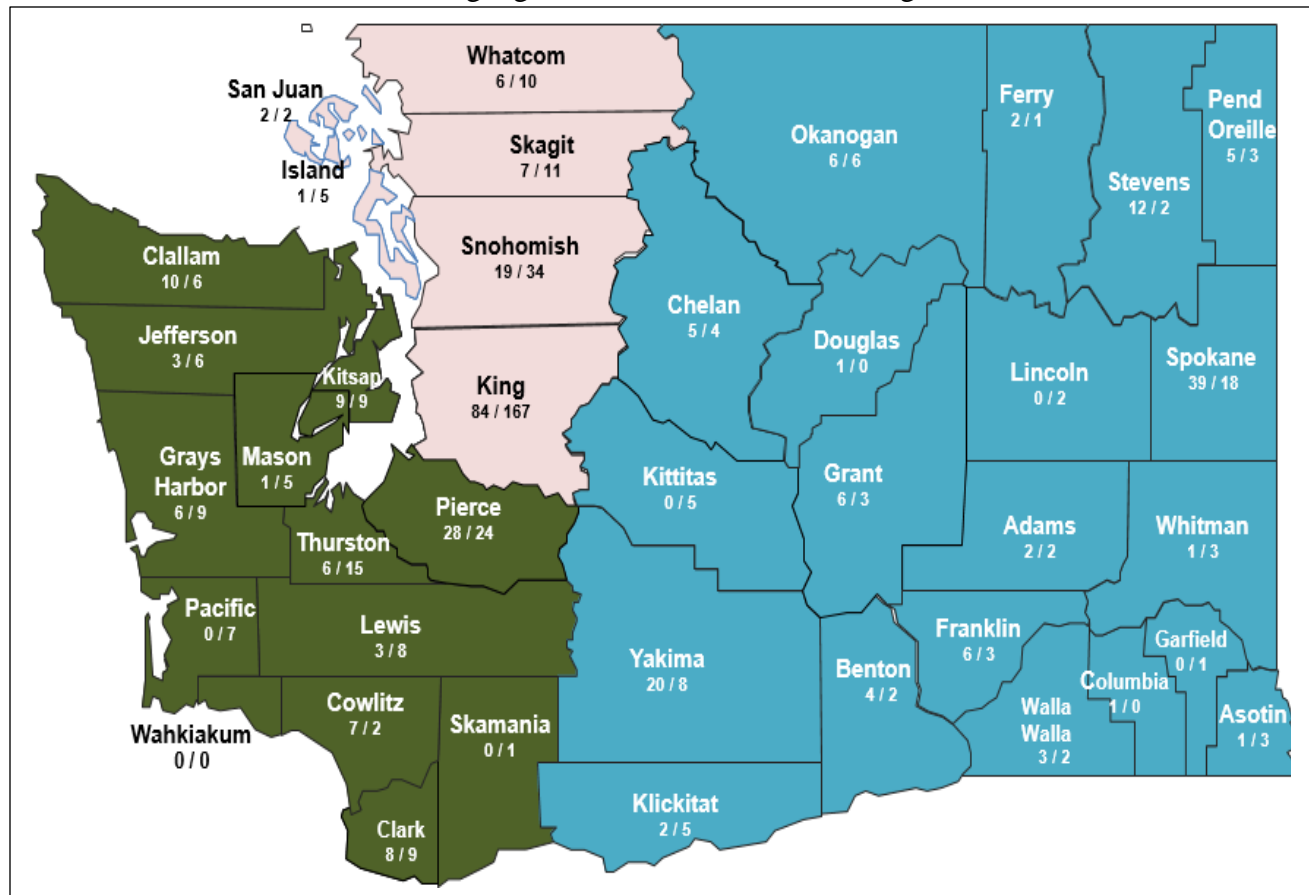
Region 3: Counties in the Olympia Peninsula, South Puget Sound, and the Southwest Washington

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 14, 2019.

**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 2019**

<b>Officers</b>			
<b>Officer Position</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Organization</b>
Executive Sponsor	Cheryl Strange	Secretary	DSHS
Chair	David Stillman	Assistant Secretary	DSHS, Economic Services Administration
Co-Chair	Pearl Bouchard	Community Living Manager	Aging and Long Term Care of Eastern Washington
Vice Co-Chair	Kevin Glackin-Coley	Executive Director	St. Leo Food Connection
Past Co-Chair	Stacy Kellogg	Director of Social Services	People for People
<b>Committee Members</b>			
<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Organization</b>	
Jim Baumgart	Policy Advisor	Governor's Executive Policy Office	
Jesus Bervis	Eligibility Manager	NeighborCare Health	
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	
Loni Greninger	Deputy Director	Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe	
Elizabeth Guerra	Community Services Director	Blue Mountain Action Council	
Liz Jaquette	Senior Manager of Programs	WithinReach	
Cathy Kinnaman	Deputy Director of HQ Operations	DSHS Aging and Long Term Support Administration, Home and Community Services	
Nelly Kinsella	Associate Director of Communications	Washington Health Benefit Exchange	
Kelly Lindseth	Employment Connections Director	Employment Security Department	
Taylor Linke	Assistant Director	Health Care Authority, Medicaid Eligibility and Community Support	
Ron Messmer	Funding Case Manager	Greater Lakes Mental Healthcare	
Stacy Mills	Family Assistance Manager	Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe	
Esteban Jimenez Porras	Managed Care Program Manager	Sea Mar Community Health Centers	
Victor Rodriguez	Program Manager	Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department	
Nicole Rose	Director of Eligibility and Provider Support	Department of Children, Youth and Family	
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 202,138 (July 2018) to 224,608 (July 2019); about 11% 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 202,138 (July 2018) to 224,608 (July 2019); about 11% increase

Objectives	Strategies
A. Provide easy access to Client Benefit Account (CBA) with clear information on homepage and CBA pages	➤ Identify components of the project 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 26.78% (2018 annual average) to 29.23% (2019 annual average as of June 30, 2019)

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

**Goal 4: Improve Communication with Staff, Partners and Clients**

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

Results\*: Increased from 26.78% (2018 annual average) to 29.23% (2019 annual average as of June 30, 2019)

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

\* Data Source: Cognos Data Report for Washington Connection.

\*\* These initiatives have been completed.

