

REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE

Washington Connection Benefit Portal

RCW 74.04.225

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

Executive Summary: Washington Connection Benefit Portal

This is the seventh annual report in fulfillment of [RCW 74.04.225](#) for FY 2017. The 2010 Washington State Legislature enacted legislation – Engrossed Second Substitute House Bill 2782, to strengthen existing efforts of state agencies and partners to implement 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 2017, over 176,600 households have created their Washington Connection Client Benefit Accounts to renew their benefits or update information online, which is an increase of 22% since July 2016 (*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 (*See Figure 4*).

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 800 registered partners throughout the state, working to improve local residents’ access to services and benefits (*See 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 comprised of 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 2016-2018 Washington Connection Strategic Plan in January 2016 after extensive collaboration in previous months (*See Figure 7*). The Committee receives updates on new initiatives related to these four strategic goals: (1) increase online access to a wide range of services and benefits; (2) improve functionality and usability for online users; (3) expand community partnerships; and (4) strengthen support for community partners.

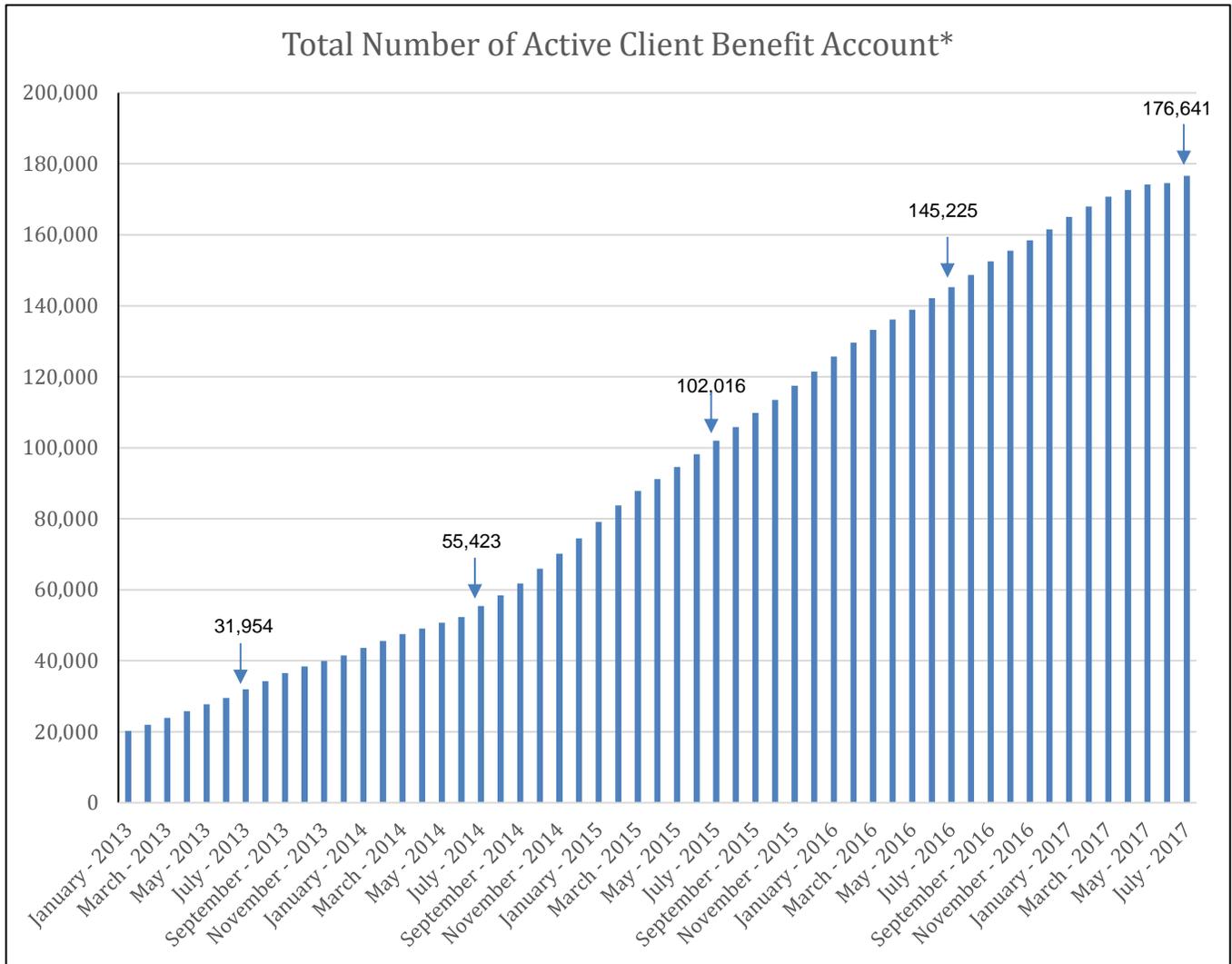
Figures

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 Online Visits on Washington Connection
5. Number of Community Partners by Organization Type
6. Advisory Committee Membership in 2017
7. 2016-2018 Washington Connection Strategic Plan

Figure 1: Total Number of Active Client Benefit Accounts

The number of active Client Benefit Accounts in the past three 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: Washington Connection Benefit Portal and Cognos Data Report, as of July 31, 2017

* To access their Client Benefit Account, a client must be a Head of Household, have federally verified Social Security Number, and meet one of the following criteria: be active in an assistance unit, have a pending application, be suspended from an active assistance unit, be pending spenddown for a medical assistance unit, be closed within the last 60 days, or be denied within the last 60 days.

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 Families
- Refugee Cash Assistance Program
- State Family Assistance Program for Legal Immigrants
- Aged, Blind or Disabled Cash Assistance Program
- Pregnant Women Assistance Program
- Diversion Cash Assistance Program
- Consolidated Emergency Assistance Program
- State Supplemental Payment 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 (added in April 2017)

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

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 online, they may visit these programs’ websites to find more information.

Figure 4: Number of Online Visits on Washington Connection



Data Source: WebTrends Data Report for Washington Connection until January 31, 2017. The data reporting activity discontinued in spring 2017 due to the change of web analytics software.

Figure 5: 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	Total
Region 1	29	103	12	5	65	6	19	239
Region 2	13	163	19	51	35	2	54	337
Region 3	38	85	15	48	24	7	34	251
Other	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	4
Total	80	353	46	104	126	15	107	831

Data Source: Cognos Data Report for Washington Connection, as of September 7, 2017

* 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 6: Advisory Committee Membership in 2017

Officers			
Officer Position	Name	Title	Organization
Executive Sponsor	Bill Moss Cheryl Strange	Acting Secretary Secretary	DSHS
Chair	David Stillman	Assistant Secretary	DSHS, Economic Services Administration
Co-Chair	Robert Coit	Executive Director	Thurston County Food Bank
Vice Co-Chair	Stacy Kellogg	Great Columbia 2-1-1 Director	People for People
Past Co-Chair	John Bowers	Dean for Basic and Transitional Studies	South Seattle Community College
Committee Members			
Name	Title	Organization	
Jim Baumgart	Policy Advisor	Governor's Executive Policy Office	
Jesus Bervis	Eligibility Manager	NeighborCare Health	
Kelly Boston	Associate Director of Communications	Washington Health Benefit Exchange	
Pearl Bouchard	Community Living Manager	Aging and Long Term Care of Eastern Washington	
Jennifer Calvin-Myers	Senior Services Manager	Kitsap County Aging and Long Term Care	
Michelle DeBell	Business Analysis Manager	Department of Commerce	
Erin Frasier	Workforce Education Policy Associate	Washington State Board for Community & Technical Colleges	
Elizabeth Guerra	Community Services Director	Blue Mountain Action Council	
Liz Jaquette	Senior Manager of Programs	WithinReach	
Kelly Lindseth	Employment Connections Director	Employment Security Department	
Lauren McGowan	Associate Director	United Way of King County, Ending Homelessness	
Ron Messmer	Funding Case Manager	Greater Lakes Mental Health	
Lisa Sohni	Outreach & Development Manager	Opportunity Council	
Kathy Thamm	Director	Community-Minded Enterprises	
Mary Wood	Assistant Director	Health Care Authority, Eligibility Policy & Services Delivery	

Figure 7: Washington Connection Strategic Plan

Goal 1: Increase online access to a wide range of services and benefits

Key Measure: Number of Active Client Benefit Accounts*

Objectives	Strategies
A. Add more services to online application to increase awareness of resources available	➤ Add “Start Next Quarter” program to Washington Connection online application**
B. Increase access to Medicaid from Washington Connection to decrease number of uninsured	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Add the new “Tailored Support for Older Adults” program to online application** ➤ Add “Crime Victims Compensation Program” to prescreening process** ➤ Improve visibility of referral links to Washington Healthplanfinder**
C. Add more referral links to prescreening and online application	➤ Identify opportunities to add more referral links as appropriate (ongoing)

Goal 2: Improve functionality and usability for online users

Key Measure: Number of Active Client Benefit Accounts*

Objectives	Strategies
A. Make it easier for applicant to complete online application, eligibility renewal, and change report for multiple programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Implement prefilled eligibility renewal and change report with known client information (pending) ➤ Explore auto renewals for non-MAGI medical coverage (pending)
B. Make it easier for applicants and partners to create their SAW account, Client Benefit Account, and Partner Account	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Enable WACON to receive SAW account update information from Washington Technology Solutions** ➤ Link SAW process and partner registration to improve usability (pending)
C. Provide instant assistance to applicants by online Live Chat or telephone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Reach out to selected clients and help them create Client Benefit Accounts (ongoing) ➤ Assess available resources and capability to set up Live Chat function (pending)

* Data Source: Cognos Data Report for Washington Connection.

** These initiatives have been completed.

Goal 3: Expand community partnerships

Key Measure: Percent of partnering Assisting Agencies that are actively submitting applications, eligibility renewals, or change reports for clients*

Objectives	Strategies
A. Increase partnerships with Department of Corrections (DOC) and Community Corrections Agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Enable online application submissions by DOC personnel with Assisting Agency status** ➤ Identify Community Corrections Agencies that are interested in sharing Washington Connection information (ongoing)
B. Increase partnerships with Tribal organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Collaborate with Tribal organizations to develop partnerships and identify ways to remove barriers to services (ongoing)
C. Increase partnerships with agencies that serve elderly population	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Collaborate with agencies serving elderly to develop partnership and identify ways to remove barriers to services (ongoing)

Goal 4: Strengthen support for community partners

Key Measure: Percent of partnering Assisting Agencies that are actively submitting applications, eligibility renewals, or change reports for clients*

Objectives	Strategies
A. Expand support to include partners of Basic Food Employment and Training program, Resource to Initiate Successful Employment program, and Employment Pipeline program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Share information about these programs with our community partners (new) ➤ Collaborate with these programs to share Washington Connection information with their partners (new) ➤ Share Employment Pipeline event flyers with area partners (new) ➤ Place links to these programs on various locations on Washington Connection “Find Services” page (new)
B. Improve current training structure and communication practices to better support community partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Engage partners periodically and support their new staff for partnership sustainability (ongoing) ➤ Establish an ongoing communication plan (new)

* Data Source: Cognos Data Report for Washington Connection.

** These initiatives have been completed.