

Third Annual Report to the Legislature and the Governor

Washington Connection Benefit Portal



RCW 74.04.225

2010 Engrossed Second Substitute House Bill 2782, Section 2

Establishment of an Online Opportunity Portal to Provide More Effective Access to Available Services

December 1, 2013



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Executive Summary

This is the third annual report in fulfillment of [RCW 74.04.225](#). 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 online 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, 2012 Bright Ideas Award, from the Ash Center at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Increased positive customer feedback indicates that the website has gained efficiencies by saving time and money for customers and community partners.

Background

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

Washington Connection removes barriers for many residents seeking help to meet basic needs by offering information about benefits and services as well as pre-screening eligibility and the option to apply online. Washington Connection also provides online tools for community partners to help their clients in applying for and renewing services and benefits.

The Secretary of the Department serves as the executive sponsor of the Washington Connection Advisory Committee, which is comprised of representatives from private and public organizations (*see Appendix A*). The Advisory Committee guides the direction of Washington Connection's long-term strategies while the Department administers the tasks to support the portal's operations, partnership development, public outreach, and analysis.

Performance Measures Indicators and Initiatives

The Advisory Committee approved its 2013-2015 Strategic Plan in January 2014. The Committee receives quarterly updates on performance measures and initiatives for these goals: (1) increase community outreach, (2) improve portal functionality, (3) increase access points,

(4) expand the online application to include more benefit programs, and (5) enhance the governance structure to support growth and sustainability (*see Appendix B*).

Update on Legislative Requirements

Provide Access to a Broad Array of Services: In 2013, residents could apply electronically for up to 21 state and federal benefit programs through Washington Connection with a single application (*see Appendix C*).

Provide Access at a Wide Array of Locations: Residents in need can now access Washington Connection from 856 registered community organizations. The Department requested and received approval from the Centers of Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to pass through CHIPRA (Children’s Health Insurance Program Reauthorization Act) grant funding to community partners to allow them to purchase equipment. The CHIPRA expansion effort, led by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, helps states close the children’s health coverage gap by engaging community organizations, nonprofit groups, and schools. As a result of the effort in this state, 256 new community partners were registered between September 2012 and August 2013 (*see Appendix D for the maps showing locations of community partners*).

Implement Paperless Application Processes: For services offered through Washington Connection, the overall online submissions – including applications, reports of change in circumstances, and eligibility renewals – have increased 6 percent since Washington Connection was implemented in December 2010. The Department continues to explore new partnership opportunities to add benefit programs to the online portal. The Department complies with federal statutes and regulations, and must allow applicants to submit applications by alternate means to ensure that access to benefits will not be restricted.

Communication Methods for Improving the System

The Department uses a variety of methods to collect feedback from customers, staff, and community partners to improve portal usability. These methods include online Customer Surveys and Partner Surveys, the “Feedback” link on the website, emails and focus groups. A Customer Support Team also follows up with customers. Based on the feedback from these sources, the Department has made changes to improve Washington Connection usability, such as redesigning the homepage to make it more user friendly, providing community partners with an online registration tool, and adding a county-level public access directory. The Department will continue to seek input to identify improvement opportunities for future enhancements.

2013 Full Report

WASHINGTON CONNECTION BENEFIT PORTAL



The Department of Social and Health Services (the Department) submits its third annual report on the Washington Connection Benefit Portal in fulfillment of [RCW 74.04.225](#). Through enacted legislation, Engrossed Second Substitute House Bill 2782 (E2SHB 2782), the Washington State Legislature mandated an online opportunity portal “be established to provide the public with more effective access to available state, federal, and local services.” The benefit portal is intended to “strengthen existing efforts by providing enhanced structure and direction to ensure that a strong partnership among colleges, state agencies, community partners, and philanthropy be established.”

Background

The Legislature charged the Department with sponsoring the portal planning process. The Department, working in collaboration with community partners, government agencies, tribes, and local jurisdictions, and with the support of philanthropic organizations, formed a private-public partnership to implement the Washington State Benefit Portal Partnership Project. Together, these partners formed the Steering Committee, and obtained the public and private funding needed to develop the benefit portal. In July 2010, they named the portal [Washington Connection](#) with a tagline, *Your Link to Services*.

Washington Connection provided online applications for state benefits starting in December 2010. In August 2011, the portal was expanded to include benefit programs administered by the City of Seattle. The City of Seattle withdrew its programs from the online application process due to budget reductions in January 2013, but the City continues to use Washington Connection’s eligibility pre-screening for its programs. Discussions are under way to add the City of Seattle’s Utility Discount Program to the online application process once its database system is upgraded.

The Steering Committee shifted to an advisory role in 2012. The Secretary of the Department serves as the executive sponsor of the Washington Connection Advisory Committee, which is comprised of representatives from private and public organizations (*see Appendix A*). Together they guide the direction of Washington Connection’s strategies while the Department supports portal operations, partnership and community outreach, and analysis. The Advisory Committee finalized its Strategic Plan for 2013-2015 in January 2013 (*see Appendix B*).

The Advisory Committee, Partnership Subcommittee, and the Department are committed to the vision that “Everyone in Washington State is able to meet basic needs and has the opportunity to prosper.” Over the past three years, Washington Connection has made headway toward that vision thanks to this commitment.

Update on Legislative Requirements

This section provides status updates on the major requirements set forth in [RCW 74.04.225](#).

Provide Access to a Broad Array of State, Federal and Local Services

Requirement: *Ensure that the portal provides access to a broad array of services, including but not limited to: health care services, higher education financial aid, tax credits, civic engagement, nutrition assistance, energy assistance, family support, and other programs.*

Result Achieved: Washington Connection provides 21 programs for which residents can apply electronically by submitting one application (*see Appendix C*). The majority (55 percent) of online applications request one service, 22 percent request two services, and 14 percent request three services, making up 91 percent of all requests. The remaining 9 percent requested four or more services. Individuals, who apply for only one service but are categorically eligible for other services, are referred to all services for which they are eligible.

As of June 2013, the top two services requested through Washington Connection were equally split between medical and food assistance at about 40 percent each. With the implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), many medical programs move from the Department to [Washington Healthplanfinder](#), the official online health insurance marketplace for the state. Effective October 1, 2013, residents who seek medical assistance for children or others will apply through Healthplanfinder instead of Washington Connection. Portal representatives are working together to facilitate a smooth transition of medical programs and referrals between the two portals by coordinating programming, marketing, training, and communication efforts.

The City of Seattle continues to use the portal's eligibility pre-screening for its seven programs, and it may add its Utility Discount Program to Washington Connection's online application process once its database system is upgraded. To add benefit programs to the Washington Connection online application, the Department has explored new partnership opportunities with the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Department of Health, Department of Commerce, Pierce County, and local Housing Authorities. These efforts continue.

Provide Access at a Wide Array of Locations

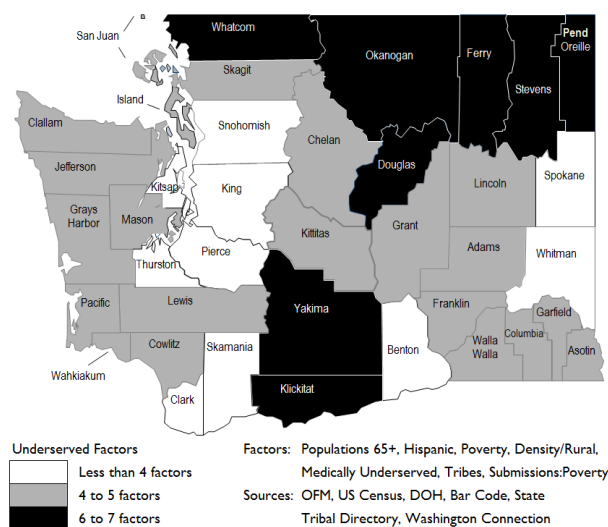
Requirement: *Provide access to the portal at a wide array of locations including but not limited to: community or technical colleges, community college campuses where community service offices are colocated, community-based organizations, libraries, churches, food banks, state agencies, early education sites, and labor unions.*

Result Achieved: In response to focus groups of community partners, the Advisory Committee developed an objective in its Strategic Plan to secure additional resources to help community partners build capacity. To that end, Department staff requested and received approval from the Centers of Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to pass through CHIPRA grant funding to community partners to purchase computer equipment. This funding enables partners to add computers at more locations and to offer more in-person assistance. The result is an increase from about 600 registered community partners in September 2012 to 856 by August 2013.

Of the 856 partners, 461 (54 percent) were Assisting Agencies and 395 (46 percent) were Host Organizations in August 2013. Assisting Agencies have staff or volunteers who help individuals apply for benefits. Host Organizations provide access to computers and information brochures. *(See Appendix D for maps of registered community partners.)*

Outreach is essential to engage more community partners in using Washington Connection as well as to educate them about the website's functions and opportunities for helping clients, especially those in underserved counties. The Strategic Plan developed an initiative to address outreach strategies in underserved counties. There are eight counties (Douglas, Ferry, Klickitat, Okanogan, Pend Oreille, Stevens, Whatcom, and Yakima) that were identified as the most underserved. These counties had concentrations of populations who were Hispanic, elderly, medically underserved, poor, and rural. In addition, these counties had federally recognized tribes as well with low ratios of online applications to populations in poverty. All but Whatcom County are in eastern Washington (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Map of Underserved Counties



Implement Paperless Application Processes

Requirement: The department shall develop a plan for implementing paperless application processes for the services included in the opportunity portal for which the electronic exchange of application information is possible. The plan should include a goal of achieving, to the extent possible, the transition of these services to the paperless application processes by July 1, 2012. The plan must comply with federal statutes and regulations and must allow applicants to submit applications by alternative means to ensure that access to benefits will not be restricted.

Result Achieved: All online (paperless) submissions have grown 6 percent since December 2010 (see Figure 2). All types of online submissions have increased with almost two-thirds of change in circumstances reports now submitted online. The cumulative volume of online submissions sums to more than 1.7 million since implementation.

Figure 2 – Online Submissions as a Share of Total Submissions

Type of Online Submission	December 2010	June 2013
Application	52% of total	52% of total
Report of Changes	45% of total	64% of total
Eligibility Renewal	17% of total	29% of total
All Online Submissions	37% of total	43% of total

Source: DSHS Barcode

All online submissions have continued to increase as noted above. It is not yet known what the upper limits are for paperless submissions for each type of submission. For example, applications have stabilized around 52 percent. The Department continues to explore where there are opportunities to increase the rate of paperless submissions.

Engrossed Second Substitute House Bill 2782 cautions that the Department must comply with federal statutes and regulations to allow applicants to submit applications by alternate means to ensure that access to benefits will not be restricted. Applying by paper may be easier than applying online for some, including homebound elderly, individuals with disabilities, and persons who cannot read English or Spanish (translations in other languages are available in paper forms only). However, more community outreach organizations are taking the online application process to individuals, using mobile devices such as i-Pads, tablets, and laptops.

In discussing online applications through the portal with agencies and local jurisdictions, the Department found that:

- Some benefit programs require an in-person assessment or consultation with local contracted agencies as part of their application process, such as the Women, Infants and Children Supplemental Nutrition Program (WIC) and the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program for aged, blind, or disabled individuals with little or no income.
- Certain governmental entities do not have database systems to receive or process online application data. For example, the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) managed by the Department of Commerce relies on local contractors to process applications rather than through a central application process.

Currently, some of the Department's applications are counted as "paper" instead of "online." For example, if an individual is interviewed by a worker and the information is typed into the ACES online system, that application is counted as a "paper" not an "online" application. The Department is exploring options for a coding change.

The child care subsidy program provides an example of a predominantly paperless process. From January 2010 through July 2013, 90 percent of the applications for subsidized child care services were by paperless means with 67 percent by phone and 23 percent online. Only 10 percent were by paper. On average, the Department processed 4,056 child care applications per month during this period.

For subsidized child care eligibility reviews, the Department processed an average of 6,475 per month during this period. Of these, 62 percent were by paperless means with 58 percent by phone and 4 percent online. Paper made up 38 percent of the total eligibility reviews for subsidized child care.

Customer Input and Online Customer Survey Outcomes

The Department actively solicits feedback from customers and partners using Washington Connection through a "*Contact Us*" link on the portal, e-mails, focus groups, and an online survey. The Department uses this feedback to improve the functionality, appearance, and navigation of Washington Connection after hearing from Washington Connection customers, community partners, and Department staff.

Listed below are enhancements made in 2013 that helped community partners improve service delivery to their customers while using Washington Connection:

- Online registration for community partners to sign up as an Assisting Agency or a Host Organization – streamlines the community partners’ registration process and allows them to track the status of their partnership registration.
- Ability for Assisting Agencies to access client benefit information – expedites the Assistant Agencies’ work process while helping clients renew eligibility or report changes in circumstances.
- Additional feature for the *Supervisor* of Assisting Agencies to manage their accounts – allows the Supervisor to update staff information and assignments.
- Additional fields in the *Partner Account* – allows community partners to provide more information for each of their service sites if they have multiple offices.
- The online county-level *Public Access Directory* of partners – customers and clients can find addresses, phone numbers, office hours, and websites of those registered community partners that offer assistance to the public.
- Online tutorials for partners on the homepage – provides community organizations with information on the requirements and benefits of becoming Host Organizations or Assisting Agencies for Washington Connection.
- Easy access to the Community Partner Survey – provides easy-to-find survey links on multiple webpages to encourage community partners to offer feedback on website usability.





In the planned January 2014 release, account users will be able to delete unwanted incomplete applications from their accounts. This functionality responds to feedback from community partners and clients to add this feature.

Washington Connection Annual Staff Costs

The total annual staff cost for Washington Connection is \$495,621, which is split 46 percent federal and 54 percent general fund state. The information technology staff cost is \$282,999 for maintenance and operations. The administrative staff cost is \$212,622, which includes supporting the Advisory Committee, community partner outreach and training, public marketing, partnership development with governmental agencies, as well as data analysis and reporting.

Strategic Plan with Performance Measures and Initiatives

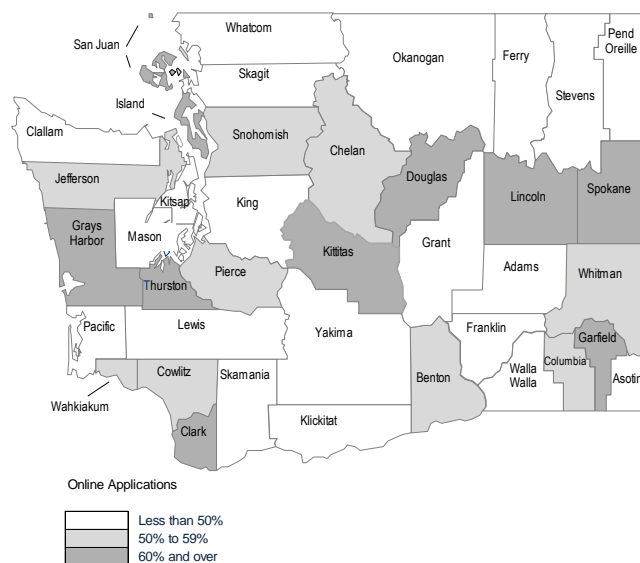
Figure 3 – Performance Measures

Goal 1 Increase community outreach to achieve public awareness	Performance Measure <i>Online Success</i>	Baseline Dec. 2010	CY 2011	CY 2012	Dec 2010 - Jun 2013
<p><u>Objective A.</u> Increase outreach to Community-based organizations so they can help clients with online applications or refer clients to Washington Connection.</p> <p><u>Objective B.</u> Increase client outreach to better serve existing clients and reach more residents in need through Washington Connection.</p>	Applications for benefits	52%	54%	54%	
	Change of Circumstances	45%	54%	65%	
	Eligibility Reviews	17%	20%	27%	
	Total - Online Submissions	37%	41%	44%	
	Counties (%) with online application rates of 50%+	44%	55%	53%	See Figure 4 – map
Goal 2 Improve portal functionality so users can easily find information and complete tasks online	Performance Measure <i>Survey Feedback</i>			Baseline Oct-Dec 2012	Update Apr-Jun 2013
<p><u>Objective A.</u> Improve usability of Washington Connection by enhancing portal functionality for clients.</p> <p><u>Objective B.</u> Improve usability of Washington Connection by enhancing portal functionality for community partners.</p> <p><u>Objective C.</u> Establish a comprehensive customer support team.</p>	Customer Feedback from Online Survey (n=2,892 for update)				
	Rated as Good/Very Good			42%	80%
	Would recommend to others			60%	91%
	Reported no trouble using website			42%	74%
	Community Partner Feedback for Online Survey (n=177 for update)				
	Rated as Good/Very Good			65%	82%
	Would recommend to others			69%	91%
	Reported no trouble using website			68%	76%
Goal 3 Increase the number of access points (places) where clients can get help (Assisting Agencies) or use a computer (Host Organizations)	Performance Measure <i>Registered Community Partners</i>			Baseline Oct 2011	Update Aug 2013
<u>Objective A.</u> Secure additional resources to help community partners build capacity.	Assisting Agencies			84 (14%)	461 (54%)
<u>Objective B.</u> Recruit and retain Assisting Agencies and Host Organizations by providing training and support.	Host Organizations			516 (86%)	395 (46%)
<u>Objective C.</u> Collaborate with organizations to coordinate outreach initiatives to leverage community networks and resources.	Total Registered Partners			600	856

Goal 4		
Expand online applications to include more benefit programs		
Objective A. Identify, initiate and collaborate with potential benefit administrators	Discussions continue with potential benefit administrators	
Goal 5		
Enhance governance structure to support growth and sustainability for Washington Connection.		
Objective A. Develop and implement a review process of the governance structure to identify needed changes.	Financial	
	Annual staff expenditures	\$495,621
	Cost allocation methodology	Available as needed
	Cost/benefit analysis template	Under development
	Grants received since 2011	
	Gates Foundation - marketing	\$150,000
	Gates Foundation - technology	\$400,000
	CHIPRA – technology and outreach	\$2,400,000
	Governance structure indicators	
	Increase community partner representation	Added 4 new members April 2013
	Determine level of committee involvement	Decision – One level of membership

Sources: DSHS Barcode; online surveys; DSHS/ESA; Washington Connection Advisory Committee

Figure 4 – Percent of Online Applications by County: July 2013



Goals and Initiatives with Status Updates

Goal 1 – Increase effective community outreach to achieve public awareness of Washington Connection

- Auto-enroll newborns of Medicaid mothers – CHIPRA (Children’s Health Insurance Program Reauthorization Act) – Completed October 2012
- Target marketing efforts (including radio public service announcements, billboard display, online advertisement, cinema theater advertisements, postcard direct delivery, etc.) to underserved counties – Ongoing
- Explore using social media to promote Washington Connection – 2013
- Develop a brochure (translated) and training to educate clients on the benefits of the Client Benefit Account – Completed December 2012

Goal 2 – Improve portal functionality so users can easily find information and complete tasks online

- Auto-populate online renewal forms – CHIP (Children’s Health Insurance Program) only (CHIPRA) – Implemented January 2013
- Use surveys and other feedback to identify and initiate improvements – Ongoing

Goal 3 – Increase the number of places where clients can get help or use a computer

- Pass through CHIPRA grant to grantees (CHIP community partners) to purchase equipment – Ongoing; remaining CHIPRA grant to be fully expended by August 2014
- Make 24 kiosks (funded by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) available for community partners to use (seven per region plus three contact centers) – In regions for placement
- Coordinate with the Health Care Authority on Medicaid Expansion and Healthplanfinder (Health Benefit Exchange) in marketing, training, and communication – Ongoing

Goal 4 – Expand online application to include more benefit programs

- Collaborate with the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction about interfacing with the Department for Free and Reduced Price School Meals – Ongoing
- Support efforts to amend Washington Connection to separate MAGI Medicaid – Changes implemented through multiple releases beginning October 2013

Goal 5 – Enhance governance structure to support growth and sustainability

- Develop a cost-benefit analysis framework – Ongoing
- Initiate review of 2014-2017 rotation of membership – October 2013

Appendices



Appendix A – Advisory Committee Membership: 2013 - 2014

Executive Sponsor

Kevin W. Quigley, Secretary, Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS)

Chair and Co-Chair

David Stillman, Assistant Secretary, Economic Services Administration, DSHS

Tony Lee, Advocacy Director, Solid Ground

Committee Members

Sharon Beaudoin, Director of Programs, WithinReach

David Bley, Director, Pacific Northwest Initiative, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

John Bowers, Director of Workforce Education, North Seattle Community College

Gina Breukelman, Community Investor, Health and Human Services, Global Corporate Citizenship, Boeing Company

Madelyn Carlson, Chief Executive Officer, People for People

Robert Coit, Executive Director, Thurston County Food Bank

Bradley Finnegan, Senior Policy Analyst, Health Benefit Exchange

Ed Fox, Health Services Director, Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe

Patty Hayes, Director, Community Health Services Division, Public Health Seattle and King County

Sue Langen, Chief Information Officer, Department of Social and Health Services

Catherine Lester, Director, Seattle Human Services Department, City of Seattle

Chris Morton, Executive Director, Associated Ministries

Abby Murphy, Policy Director, Washington Association of Counties

Manning Pellanda, Managing Director, Eligibility and Service Delivery, Health Care Authority

Alice Shobe, Executive Director, Building Changes

Andi Smith, Senior Policy Advisor, Governor's Executive Policy Office

Laura Smith, Executive Director, Washington Dental Service Foundation

Kathy Thamm, Director, Community-Minded Enterprises

Richard Torrance, Managing Director, Crime Victims Advocacy, Department of Commerce

Barbara Wasserman, Medical Social Worker, Swinomish Tribe

Appendix B – 2013-2015 Strategic Plan

Goal 1: Increase effective communication outreach to achieve public awareness

Objectives

- A. Increase outreach to community-based organizations so they can help clients with online applications or refer clients to Washington Connection
- B. Increase client outreach to better serve existing clients and reach more residents in need through Washington Connection

Goal 2: Improve portal functionality so users can easily find information and complete tasks online

Objectives

- A. Improve usability of Washington Connection by enhancing portal functionality for clients
- B. Improve usability of Washington Connection by enhancing portal functionality for community partners
- C. Establish a comprehensive customer support system

Goal 3: Increase the number of access points where clients can get help or use a computer

Objectives

- A. Secure additional resources to help community partners build capacity
- B. Recruit and retain Assisting Agencies and Host Organizations by providing training and support to community partners
- C. Collaborate with organizations to coordinate outreach initiatives to leverage community networks and resources

Goal 4: Include more benefit programs

Objectives

- A. Identify, initiate and collaborate with potential Benefit Administrators
- B. Modify online application to meet requirements of Medicaid Expansion and Affordable Care Act

Goal 5: Enhance Governance structure to support growth and sustainability

Objective

- A. Develop and implement a review process of the governance structure to identify needed changes

Appendix C – Benefit Programs Available through Online Application

Basic Food

Food Assistance Program for Legal Immigrants – state funded

Cash (the worker determines programs for which the client is eligible)

- Temporary Assistance for Needy Family (TANF)

- Refugee Cash Assistance

- Aging, Blind, Disability (ABD) Cash Assistance

- Pregnant Women's Assistance

- Diversion Cash Assistance

- Consolidated Emergency Assistance Program

- State Family Assistance Program

- State Supplemental Payment

Medical (the worker determines programs for which the client is eligible)*

- Family Medical*

- ABD Medical (Single Disabled)*

- Alien Emergency Medical*

- Medical Care Services (Disability Lifeline Medical)*

- Take Charge Family Planning*

Children's Medical (the worker determines program for which the child is eligible)*

- Children's Medical and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)*

Pregnancy Medical*

Drug or Alcohol Treatment*

Help with medical bills (from the last three months)*

Medicare Savings Program*

Psychiatric Indigent Inpatient*

Healthcare / Workers with Disabilities

Working Connections Child Care

In-Home Long Term Care Services

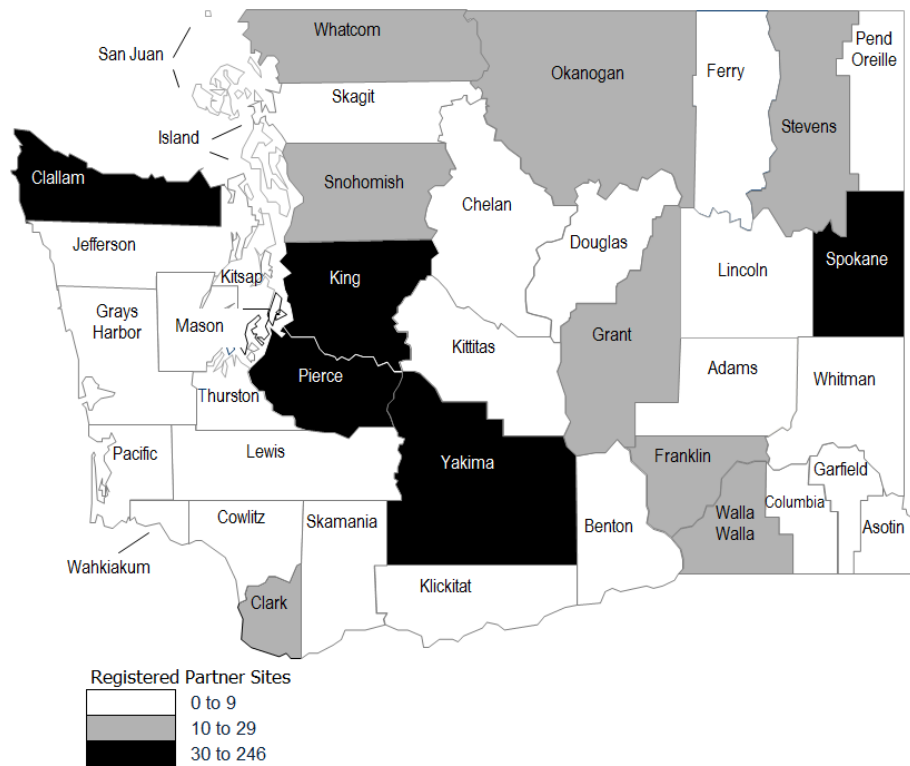
Assisted Living Facility / Adult Family Home

Nursing Home

Hospice

** Note: Starting October 1, 2013, these programs are available through the Washington Healthplanfinder site of the Health Benefit Exchange under Washington Apple Health coverage. Reference information about Washington Healthplanfinder is available on Washington Connection for applicants who meet the criteria.*

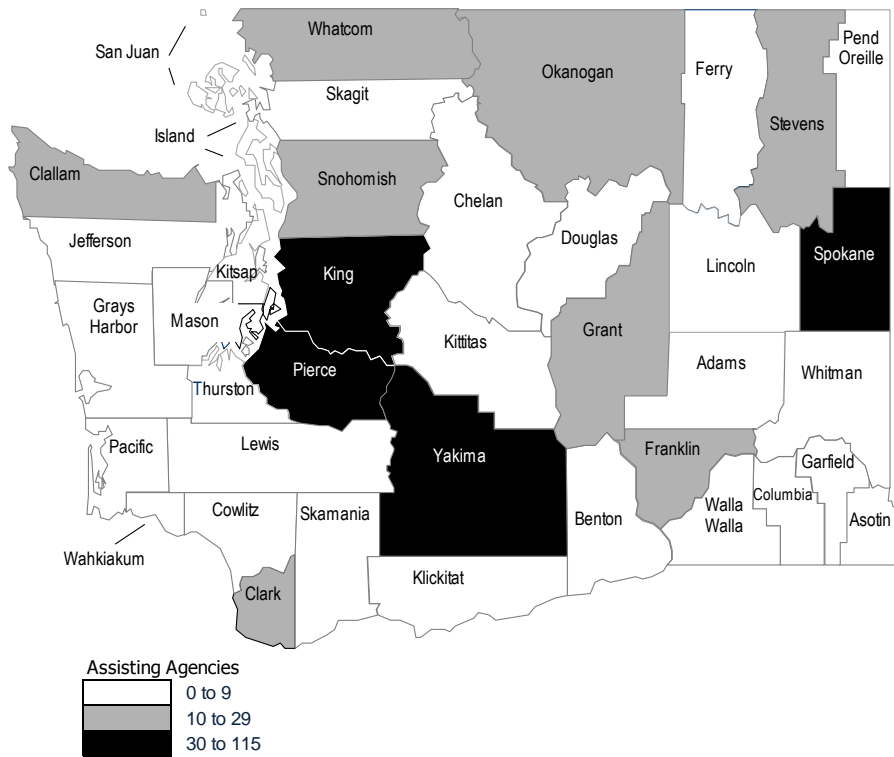
Appendix D – Maps of Registered Community Partners – August 2013



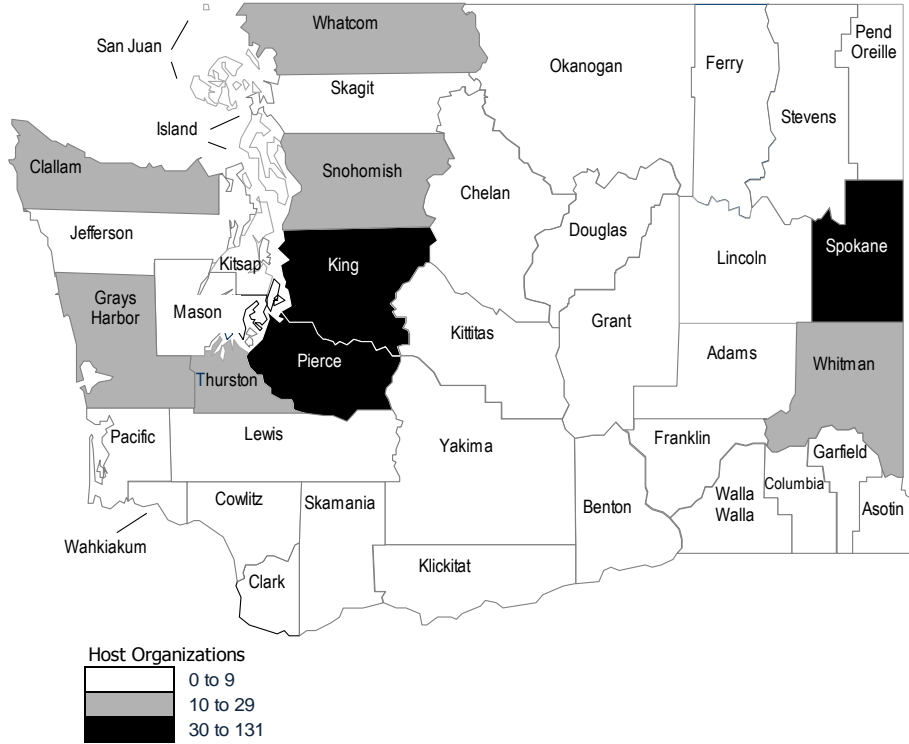
Source: Washington Connection

Registered Partners - Registered partners are organizations located within the state that assist residents in accessing benefits and services. There are two levels of registered partners – Assisting Agencies and Host Organizations (*see maps on following page that detail concentrations of Assisting Agencies and Host Organizations*).

- **Assisting Agencies** – Organizations that provide applicants with assistance in completing and submitting online applications, eligibility reviews, and changes of circumstances. An Assisting Agency must fill out Data Share Agreements and Confidentiality Non-disclosure forms. These organizations can view applications and track staff work.
- **Host Organizations** – Organizations that agree to offer any of the following: 1) display posters and printed marketing materials about Washington Connection, 2) provide applicants with access to a computer with an icon to Washington Connection on the desktop, or 3) provide applicants with assistance in answering questions about the Washington Connection website.



Source: Washington Connection



Source: Washington Connection