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**Title**

**WA State Health Benefit Exchange – *Washington Healthplanfinder*  
Online Marketplace - ADA Accessibility Initiative and Status**

**Category**

Digital Services: Government to Citizen

**Contact**

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**State**

Washington

**Project Initiation**

January 2018

**Project Completion**

April 2020 (ongoing)

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## Executive Summary

The Washington Health Benefit Exchange (the Exchange) was established in 2011 in response to the passage of the Affordable Care Act. The Exchange provides more than 1.8 million Washington state residents with quality, affordable health insurance coverage and is recognized as one of the nation's top state health insurance exchanges. The Exchange strives to deliver high-quality, affordable health insurance coverage for all Washington residents. It operates via *Washington Healthplanfinder*, a robust, innovative platform that enables individuals and families to browse, compare and enroll in health and dental plans.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in four adults is living with a disability. Approximately 12.8 percent of Washington state's 7.1 million residents report having a disability, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2015 American Community Survey. People with disabilities need health care for the same reasons everyone else does – to stay well, be active, work and participate in community life. However, disability-related disparities in access to health care are prevalent.

In 2018, the Exchange Board adopted a Statement of Equity which states: *“Equity is a fundamental pillar to the society we seek to build. The process of advancing toward equity will be disruptive and demands vigilance, dismantling deeply entrenched systems of privilege and oppression. We must focus our efforts on people and places where needs are greatest, especially communities of color, and go beyond remedying a particular inequity to address all determinants of health. Our goal is for all Washingtonians to have full and equal access to opportunities, power, and resources to achieve their full potential.”*

The Exchange views this statement as a guide to advancing its commitment to connecting all Washington residents with health care coverage, including individuals with disabilities.

During the past two years, the Exchange has committed to making *Washington Healthplanfinder* accessible to people with disabilities. A cross-functional accessibility workgroup was formed to create and implement a work plan that would support the organization's goals and drive outcomes. After the plan was approved by leadership in October 2018, metrics were developed to track, triage, and prioritize ADA issues in new development. As a result, there's been an 85% decrease in accessibility issues being introduced into production. Overall, ADA compliance improved, and the development system lifecycle costs of accessibility decreased. Accessibility has become more integrated into the agile process. Most importantly, people with disabilities and assistive technology users can now access, browse, and purchase health plans without barriers.

## Description of Business Problems and Solutions

The Accessibility Work Group formed in 2018 was a venue to discuss legal and legislative issues, identify the meaning of accessibility from both a legal and organizational perspective, develop new policies, establish best practices and make recommendations for improved processes.

The *Washington Healthplanfinder* was identified as the highest priority for accessibility because that's where consumers can access, browse, and shop for health plans. An accessibility consulting firm conducted an audit of the site to better understand its compliance with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0., which covers a wide range of recommendations for making Web content more accessible.

The audit testing was conducted on desktop and mobile devices. Automated testing was conducted with IBM Dynamic Accessibility Plugin and SiteImprove. User testing included people with disabilities. Issues found were assigned a priority based on a mix of factors, including impact rating, the volume of occurrence, key functionality (business priority), and location of issues.

Gaps identified included:

- There wasn't dedicated staff ensuring ADA compliance. ADA was initially rarely thought of and generally became somewhat of an afterthought.
- Staff was not familiar with how to integrate accessibility into their design practices.
- Contracted development staff had little experience in coding for ADA.
- There were no complete accessibility requirements laid out for teams to follow.
- Contractually, there was no binding agreement stating that our contracted development vendor had to adhere to WCAG 2.0 standards.
- There was no pattern library for re-usable accessible code.
- Most testing staff did not have experience with accessibility testing.
- There were no business processes directing staff or the contracted vendor where to begin.
- The automated accessibility test tools were not available.

To be successful, the Exchange needed a more integrated process across teams to own and drive accessibility initiatives. Fixing issues downstream had proven to be expensive and time-consuming, with multiple rounds of development and quality assurance cycles.

The Exchange reviewed the audit findings and concluded there were high impact areas that needed immediate attention. A new role was created for a Digital Accessibility Specialist who

would focus solely on compliance and integrate and oversee new processes to ensure ADA compliance.

## **Significance to the Improvements of the Operation of Government**

As the teams became comfortable in the agile process and ADA requirements, the integration of design and development became more cohesive and the ability to explore options to meet the federal section 508 and WCAG requirements became less of a burden. The teams took the opportunity to discuss the connection between design and code at the onset of design sessions. Additionally, an analysis was done to identify gaps between the existing Exchange ADA checklist and the industry standard WCAG checklist. Processes were then improved across the development lifecycle. Accessibility was written into technical user stories, leveraging designs and accessibility requirements. As the teams started building new features and functionality that were accessible, the opportunity to bring legacy code together with new accessible code was at the forefront of the development process.

Metrics were developed to track, triage, and prioritize ADA issues in new development. Since October 2019, the teams have logged over 200 issues against user stories. Today, 26 items are unresolved and are being tracked for completion. These metrics continue to be reported weekly and discussed across the scrum teams in daily standups, which allows for issues to be fixed prior to release. This process change has resulted in an 85% decrease in accessibility issues being introduced into production. Overall, ADA compliance improved, and the development system lifecycle costs of accessibility decreased. Accessibility has become more integrated into the agile process. Most importantly, people with disabilities and assistive technology users can now access, browse, and purchase health plans without barriers.

## **Benefits of the Project**

The Exchange continues to enhance its accessibility, which has yielded the following benefits:

- Broadened the reach to consumers who can use and access Washington Healthplanfinder.
- Increased traffic to the website and made it easier for people to browse, shop and purchase health plans.
- Improved the site and increased usability for all visitors, including users that rely on assistive technology.
- Demonstrated a commitment and care for people with disabilities.

- Complies with legislation to reduce legal liabilities.
- Standardize web design, build and maintenance.
- Cut overall production costs and streamline.

The Exchange is focused on additional initiatives to integrate accessibility into current workflows across the organization, as well as tools and processes that could help the Exchange meet their accessibility goals and incorporate the recommendations into the agile process. Design systems, pattern libraries and integrated development and QA tools will be implemented to continue support of accessibility and streamline the process.

The Exchange continues to improve ADA compliance and integrate new processes to meet our commitment to access for all. The Exchange has expanded accessibility initiatives to include the corporate site, Account Worker applications, correspondence, social media, internal Human Resource tools and email communications. Automated development and testing tools are currently being evaluated to improve the process.

Accessibility is not a one-and-done process. Bringing websites, mobile applications and other tools in line with standards – and keeping them that way – often involves substantial adjustment to everyday business practices, not only among designers and developers but throughout the organization. While difficult at first, these changes also yield many benefits, starting with improved usability for all users (not just those with disabilities), better-aligned practices across the organization, and often greater satisfaction among staff. The Exchange has a dedicated staff to continue to improve and support accessibility for all Washingtonians.