

Accessibility and Technology

A key priority for Washington’s workforce system over the next 10 years is ensuring universal access to the entire array of education, training, and support services. Every Washington resident should have the opportunity to progress along a clearly defined and guided career pathway that leads to economic self-sufficiency.

Advances in technology offer one way to provide both remote and universal access to the state’s workforce system. Tapping this technology will help more Washington residents, including those with barriers, access a wide range of services.

While technology will tear down a number of barriers to workforce system access, advances in technology—or the way it is applied throughout the system—*will not solve all accessibility issues*. Executing universal accessibility to Washington’s workforce system will require a concerted, long-term effort from all partners, and a willingness to adapt and refine service delivery strategies to meet customer needs. This collective commitment is essential if all Washington workers are to benefit from an improving economy.

Ensuring access to everyone

Every Washington resident needs universal, barrier-free access to our state’s workforce system. Technology is a powerful tool that can reduce obstacles to access. However, it’s clear that technology will not solve all accessibility issues. Tailored approaches to different populations are required.

Accessibility and Technology Goals

The following goals will help move Washington’s system forward:

- Implement secure, wireless Internet access in public areas of all comprehensive One-Stop centers in Washington by 2020.
- Establish a state-level advisory committee on accessibility and barrier solutions and ensure the designation of local advisory committees during the first two years of the plan. By the fourth year of the plan, ensure the state-level advisory committee has received annual progress reports on One-Stop centers’ accessibility at the local level.
- Identify and encourage local pilot programs that use technology to facilitate and improve integrated service delivery for customers, including programs designed to improve access to the system.

In addition, soon after the passage of WIOA, Governor Jay Inslee directed the Workforce Board to work with the system’s stakeholders to shape Washington’s strategic plan toward three goals to maximize the workforce system’s impact:

1. *Help more people find and keep jobs that lead to economic self-sufficiency, with a focus on disadvantaged populations.*
2. *Close skill gaps for employers, with a focus on in-demand industry sectors and occupations, including through apprenticeships.*
3. *Work together as a single, seamless team to make this happen.*

These three goals will inform the larger system and guide any changes. Below are ways the system is evolving to better serve all populations through enhanced accessibility.

Universal access across the workforce system

Fundamental to the Workforce Board’s vision for the workforce system is the concept of *universal accessibility*. Washington’s workforce system must be prepared and able to serve jobseekers from all kinds of backgrounds, who face a variety of barriers. Universal accessibility encompasses both *physical accessibility* of all facilities, as well as *programmatically accessibility*—taking into account the particular access needs of all customers. Integration of service delivery and better coordination among workforce system partners will allow services and delivery approaches to be customized to meet a wide range of needs.

Identifying and Removing Barriers to Workforce Services

WIOA has provided new energy across Washington’s workforce system to address and remove barriers to access so that a greater number of Washingtonians can connect with a career pathway and a living-wage job. Through numerous WIOA planning meetings, public forums, and community town halls, an overarching theme has been that the system must provide high quality, customized services for all jobseekers with barriers.

The Workforce Board embraced the new federal workforce act as a chance to improve service delivery and remove barriers to access for *all individuals with barriers to employment*, not just those populations covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act. While developing recommendations related to accessibility, the Workforce Board engaged stakeholders, staff, and policy experts representing a wide range of the 14 populations designated as “populations with barriers” under WIOA:

Populations with Barriers under WIOA	
<i>Displaced Homemakers</i>	<i>Youth in, or formerly in, Foster Care</i>
<i>Low-Income Individuals</i>	<i>English Language Learners</i>

Populations with Barriers under WIOA	
<i>Native Americans, Alaska Natives, and Hawaiians</i>	<i>Migrant/Seasonal Farmworkers</i>
<i>Individuals with Disabilities</i>	<i>Individuals within Two Years of Exhausted TANF Eligibility</i>
<i>Older Individuals</i>	<i>Single Parents/Pregnant Women</i>
<i>Ex-Offenders</i>	<i>Long-Term Unemployed</i>
<i>Homeless Individuals</i>	<i>Veterans</i>
<i>“Other Groups” Designated by the Governor</i>	

An initial look at how technology could be used to remove access barriers for individuals with disabilities quickly expanded in scope to consider *all* strategies to remove access barriers to *all* barrier populations. A System Barriers Map that outlines these is available at: <http://wtb.wa.gov/Documents/WIOABARRIERPOPULATIONchart.pdf>.

Some of the common barriers faced by vulnerable populations include:

- Lack of recent work experience.
- Difficulties with transportation, housing, or childcare.
- Lack of work-appropriate wardrobe or resources (tools, equipment, safety gear)
- Inability to access necessary language translation services or accessibility devices.
- Lack of financial and educational literacy.
- Inability to successfully utilize technology resources.

Technology is a Powerful Tool to Remove Barriers

Advances in personal computing and telecommunications technology have made the Internet and person-to-person connectivity a feature of many people’s daily lives. WIOA acknowledges these improvements by opening the door to “virtual” service delivery—bringing services each participant needs to their doorstep, or kitchen table.

Recognizing that barrier removal is a project that requires sustained effort over time, the Workforce Board started work on establishing its first standing advisory committee to lead a statewide effort on removing barriers to access throughout the system. The standing advisory committee, described below, is expected to work with local advisory committees on accessibility issues, starting an ongoing conversation between local workforce system practitioners and state-level policymakers. In this way, the committee will be able to systematically identify and address access barriers.

The first three recommended strategies embrace technology to achieve a more accessible workforce system. The final recommendation is designed to address system barriers of any nature, including barriers that cannot be addressed solely through technology.

Strategies to Improve Access for All

Technology as a Barrier Removal Tool

Secure Wireless at Comprehensive One-Stops

Only a decade ago, access to the Internet was confined to a desktop-based personal computer at home, school, the office, or a library. Today, wireless Internet is available in restaurants, theaters, coffee shops and even at 30,000 feet in an airline seat. Smartphones are common, bringing Internet connectivity to the palms of our hands. However, not all of the workforce system's customers are connected—and many will require training on the baseline technological skills needed to use these tools and be competitive in today's labor market.

Expanding wireless Internet connectivity at one-stop centers could pay off particularly for the blind and low-vision community. One local area in Washington is piloting a “paperless” one-stop experience facilitated by secure wireless access at its WorkSource center. All education and training information, including pamphlets and documents, are digitized in a standard format and stored online. WorkSource center staff members receive regular training on how to digitize materials. People who are blind or low-vision who visit a one-stop center can navigate to those digitally archived materials using their own accessibility devices. Digitally archived materials are also accessible to jobseekers with mobility, transportation, and/or childcare responsibilities that may prevent them from accessing a WorkSource center.

Virtual Service Delivery

With WIOA, education and training services are no longer required to be administered in person. The availability of online, real-time, hybrid (blended online and face to face), and open source course materials warrants close system collaboration. Beyond simply providing access, the system must help customers gain the skills to effectively use these new technological tools. Some tools have become increasingly common in just a few short years. Video conferencing technology, for example, is widely available and less expensive than in years past. Reducing or eliminating the need for customers to travel and *physically* access a one-stop center will remove accessibility barriers for many Washingtonians.

Services offered virtually via computer, tablet, or smartphone empower people with mobility challenges, or anyone preferring to access information remotely. These tools allow them to

begin progressing down a career pathway on their terms and at a time and location more convenient to them. Virtual service delivery helps customers with childcare or transportation barriers make progress toward a better future. A parent can hop online when the kids are asleep and gain access to services, or a family who lacks a car can avoid making several bus transfers to reach a one-stop center—if the center is reachable by bus at all. Many rural Washingtonians live hours away from the nearest comprehensive one-stop center. Accessing these services at home just makes sense. Even rural customers without reliable Internet connections still benefit from virtual service delivery—library systems statewide have expressed interest in partnering with the workforce system to create “remote connection sites” strategically located around Washington.

Promoting Open Education Resources

Washington’s 34 community and technical colleges provide a wide range of open education resources (OERs), online courses, and e-Learning strategies to workforce system customers. These resources allow working adults and place-bound customers who are far from a college or university campus to access education when it fits their work and life schedules. OERs are teaching and learning materials that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license. These resources may be used free of charge, distributed without restriction, and modified without permission. Often, OERs take the form of digital textbooks, video lectures, assessments, and new forms of “gamified” multimedia education experiences. Washington’s community and technical colleges are leaders in the OER movement, ready to share their expertise with the entire workforce system.

Promoting eLearning

Washington’s public higher education institutions also offer a wide array of e-Learning strategies that can be integrated into the workforce system where appropriate. E-Learning is high quality online instruction and assessment that allows students to study and learn on their own schedules. Customers with physical, sensory, behavioral health, or cognitive disabilities as well as rural populations and economically disadvantaged communities, can benefit from online instruction tailored to their needs.

Enhanced Delivery of Online Job-Matching Services

In early 2016, the state is expected to launch WorkSourceWA.com, a redesigned and enhanced online job-matching service for its WorkSource one-stop career center system. Powered by Monster Government Solutions, the new job-match website will give Washington’s workforce system customers access to all jobs and resumes posted on WorkSourceWA.com. This new database offers a far richer and deeper pool of possible resume matches than Go2Worksource.com provided. Another bonus: the proprietary job-matching algorithms

programmed into the website are designed to match the skills and competencies of individual jobseekers with specific skills and competencies needed for each job. This promises better quality matches between businesses and jobseekers, and offers unsuccessful candidates a better sense of the specific education and training required for similar positions in the future.

As a result of the collaborative work sparked by the Accessibility and Technology Task Force, system partners identified a potential strategy to maximize the impact of the new job-matching website for people with disabilities. Federal government contractors are required by the U.S. Department of Labor to use one-stop centers to post job openings, and are expected to work toward a utilization goal of ensuring a minimum 7 percent of their workforce are employees with disabilities, across all job descriptions. Federal contractors have an incentive to work with this system to achieve this goal—and the new job-matching system will be configured to facilitate the match.

In early stages of the website’s design, users with a disability could choose to have a “disability” label visible on their jobseeker profile. Federal contractors could use the system to identify any person with the label made visible. Under the earlier design, jobseekers with disabilities were forced to either disclose their disability status to *all* employers or turn the label off and not be identified as disabled to *any* employers—even though federal contractors were especially interested in seeking them out.

Many partners from the disability community raised concern about a perceived disadvantage in disclosing a disability in a job-search before speaking “face-to-face” with an employer. To avoid this complication but still allow federal contractors to be matched with individuals with disabilities, the task force proposed adding a feature to the job-matching system that would allow people with disabilities to disclose their status *only* to federal contractors. Federal contractors can search and filter for jobseekers that have self-disclosed a disability but non-identified employers will not be able to search or filter for jobseekers with disabilities.

Any public-facing service offered to workforce system participants must be accessible to all, including individuals who use a screen-reading device or other accessibility equipment. Ensuring that the state’s new online job-matching site is accessible for all, the site’s architects have agreed to go beyond the ADA’s Section 508 accessibility standards and instead adopt the more stringent, internationally recognized [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0](#). When the new website is ready to launch, system partners will test the “public-facing” elements of the website with customers with barriers who have intermediate skill levels in accessing software and technologies. Any needed accessibility adjustments will be made before launch or immediately after.

Thinking Beyond Technology: Removing workforce system barriers

Local and State Advisory Groups on Barrier Solutions

WIOA allows local area boards to establish standing committees to work on issues specifically faced by individuals with disabilities, including Section 188 and ADA compliance.

Washington's workforce system has embraced a more expansive goal of improving access for populations with a wide variety of barriers to access, including economic barriers, geographic barriers, physical barriers, language and cultural barriers, low-level education and skills barriers, and behavioral health barriers. To build consensus on a coordinated and sustained effort to remove these access barriers, a standing Workforce Board committee on accessibility issues is being created.

The Workforce Board's advisory committee on barrier solutions will be informed by local advisory committees that evaluate accessibility issues at the community level and will help local boards prioritize projects and track progress toward improved customer service for those populations. The state standing committee will additionally serve as a forum for sharing best practices and strategies to improve access and advocate for resources and policy development that will improve services for all populations with barriers.

Local Workforce Development Councils (WDCs) will partner with the state advisory committee on barrier solutions to identify barrier removal projects and best practices that can be brought to scale statewide. Local WDCs have taken the lead for several years in convening their own advisory groups on system accessibility at the local level. Each WDC will designate either one of these existing advisory groups or create a new one to focus on barrier removal work, and will seek to recruit members from a broad spectrum of populations with barriers to employment, including, but not limited to: people with physical, sensory, behavioral health, or cognitive disabilities; economically disadvantaged communities; low-skilled and under-educated individuals; English language acquisition or bilingual communities; disadvantaged youth; and the long-term unemployed. Local WDCs are encouraged to engage with real customers with barriers, including encouraging customers to be part of their local committees focused on barriers.

These local advisory groups on barrier solutions will create an annual progress report to their local WDC outlining and discussing issues, accomplishments, and future deliverables related to the accessibility goals in local WDC strategic plans; concerns and challenges faced by populations with access barriers, as seen from the advisory groups' perspectives; a work-plan containing recommendations for improving accessibility in the coming year; and a progress report on previous work-plans for improving accessibility. The same report will be delivered each year to the state advisory group on barrier solutions, which will incorporate identified

local best practices into statewide strategies. The state advisory group on barrier removal will also redirect resources toward barrier removal projects it prioritizes, and will help local advisory groups identify and broadly recruit representative members.

Summary and Goals

In conclusion, a truly accessible workforce system that makes full use of technology, will implement secure, wireless Internet access in public areas of all comprehensive One-Stop centers in Washington by 2020. The system will also include state-level advisory committees during the first two years of the plan, with annual progress reports on One-Stop center accessibility at the local level. Finally, the local pilot programs that use technology to facilitate and improve integrated service delivery for all customers will be identified and encouraged.