# Medical Board of California Develops License Alert Mobile App for Consumer Protection Efforts

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Advances in technology have dramatically transformed the way the public consumes and shares information with friends, family members, and peer groups. The age of the smart phone has made it easier than ever for consumers around the world to obtain information they can use to make informed decisions about their health care.

Prior to the development of its mobile app for Apple iOS devices, the Medical Board of California's website was already a powerful consumer tool. The Board's website is powered by the California Department of Consumer Affairs' (DCA) searchable database, named DCA Search, which hosts profile pages for every allopathic physician licensed in California—past and present, active and inactive.

DCA Search allows consumers to search for their physician's profile page and learn useful information, including where the physician went to medical school; his or her address of record; disciplinary actions; and certain criminal convictions, medical malpractice judgments and settlements against the physician that meet the requirements for posting.

The technology featured in DCA Search became the bedrock for the Board's iOS app and gave Board programmers the functionality they needed to develop the first-of-its-kind app among medical boards across the country.

## Why iOS?

To start, Board staff reviewed website traffic for the first quarter of 2018, which revealed that 30% of the Board's visits (60,000 unique visitors) came through smart phones and tablets.

A further analysis of smart phone and tablet website traffic revealed that 70% was generated from devices using the Apple iOS operating system, followed by devices using the Android operating system—making iOS the logical choice to begin app development. The number of mobile devices accessing the Board's website has slightly increased since the app's launch. In 2020, 30% of the Board's website traffic came from mobile devices and 75% of mobile traffic came from Apple iOS devices.

The Board has no dedicated app developer on staff; however, staff members with experience in app development lent their programming talents to the Board. Frank Eslami, an Information Technology Specialist II, and Sean Eichelkraut, Information Technology Manager I, both within the Board's Information Systems Branch, began development of the app in late 2017. The app officially released on the Apple App Store in the summer of 2018.

## Anatomy of an App

In October 2017, DCA launched DCA Search, adding several new improvements to enhance functionality across all platforms. DCA programmers created an application program interface (API) to build DCA Search, enabling two computers to talk to each other and exchange data in a way that is easy to use in another system.

The API generates blocks of data that can be parsed and used in a variety of applications. The same web services that deliver the blocks of data to authorized users for use in their systems were used by the Board's programmers to kickstart the development of the iOS app.

The look and feel of the app are closely aligned with the look and feel of the mobile version of the Board's website, with some notable changes.

First, the app features a streamlined version of the Board's website to maximize the display of the iPhone or iPad. The app refactors the website content in a way that is mobile friendly—it strips out the header information, pulls out the data and displays it with an enhanced tabbed layout.

The app allows users to create a "following" list of up to 16 physicians and customize the list by adding name descriptors (i.e., "mom's doctor") while receiving notifications when updates are detected on the physicians' licenses.

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The app sends alerts to users when:

- A physician's name, address, practice status, license expiration, or survey data changes
- When administrative actions and enforcement documents are added to a physician's profile
- When a physician's license is suspended, revoked, or placed on probation

To receive an alert, the app must be open or running in the background. This is because the app uses Apple's proprietary technology known as "background fetch," which allows the app to regularly "fetch" changes on the physicians' profiles stored in the DCA's search system.

If the app finds changes on the license of a physician being followed, it sends a notification alert to the consumer. If the app is closed, the user will need to re-open the app to receive the notification.

### Marketing

The Board created a media campaign surrounding the release of the app that consisted of a video, podcast, news release, newsletter article, fliers and cards and social media messages.

The Board also held a press conference on July 26, 2018. The release of the app was covered by several large news outlets in the region, including the *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and CBS News. The media campaign surrounding the app was successful, leading to approximately 6,000 downloads during its first week.

### App Updates

The app officially launched on July 26, 2018, and was updated to improve functionality and keep up-to-date with the latest version of the iOS operating system. The Board's programmers plan to add new app functions to enable notifications without having the app open or running in the background.

The Board's developers are also planning on an Android version of the app. To date, the app has received more than 12,000 downloads on the Apple App Store and has a rating of 3.3 out of 5 stars.

### Supporting Consumer Protection

The app is another opportunity for the Board to communicate with stakeholders and support its consumer protection mission. The app is used in conjunction with the Board's website, email subscriber alerts, call center, webmaster and social media platforms — including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube — to keep consumers and stakeholders informed.

As technology evolves, the Board will continue to leverage those advancements to improve stakeholder communication efforts. ■

**About the Author**

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