

HEALTH

# Volunteers learn about health insurance, how to advise others

Statewide program helps people navigate public, private systems

MARY LANE GALLAGHER  
THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Don Lashua, a retired business owner living in Everson, was puzzled by Medicare's new prescription drug program last spring. So when he read that volunteers were needed to help seniors understand the new drug benefit, the 73-year-old signed up.

"I volunteered, probably selfishly, to find out for myself what I could," Lashua said.

Lashua is now one of about eight volunteers with the Whatcom County helpline of the Statewide Health Insurance Benefits Advisors. The program, part of the Office of the Insurance Commissioner, trains volunteers to help people navigate the public and private health insurance systems.

## TO VOLUNTEER

For more information on becoming a volunteer with the Statewide Health Insurance Benefits Advisors:

- Call 715-6533
- E-mail [shibahelpline@whatcomalliance.org](mailto:shibahelpline@whatcomalliance.org).
- Or attend an informational open house from 4 to 6 p.m. Wednesday at St. Joseph Hospital South Campus, 809 E. Chestnut St.

Training will be held later this month.

Known by its acronym SHIBA, the program is holding an open house Wednesday for people interested in joining the cadre of volunteers.

Training sessions totaling 30 hours begin later this month and will include topics such as Medicare and Medicaid, billing and fraud, employer plans,

Basic Health and disability insurance.

Volunteers don't need previous knowledge about the health-care or insurance industries, said Elizabeth Jennings, coordinator of the helpline. They just need an interest in helping others.

"Our favorite phrase is, 'I don't know, but I'll find out,' " Jennings said.

Volunteers may also work on outreach projects to sign up more children for health insurance and to help local small businesses find affordable insurance plans for their employees, Jennings said.

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"It really is something where people can find their niche and run with an interest," she said.

Most of Lashua's time is spent explaining the new drug program to other seniors. He enjoys helping people overcome the confusion.

"Some are even crying, not knowing where to turn," he said. "They're afraid they're going to make a mistake. We're able to help them work through it.

"It's really a rewarding thing to do."