

# Health program ‘a bright light’

By Katherine Tam  
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OLYMPIA — Waylon Teeter’s back pain became so severe that it disrupted his life. He could not take jobs as a tour manager. He gave up fishing and golfing.

With no health insurance, Teeter reached out to the state Department of Social and Health Services for help, but was told he did not qualify.

He turned next to the CHOICE Regional Health Network, which connected him to a coalition of doctors, hospitals and pharmacists providing free care to the poor.

He got surgery to treat a herniated disk in three weeks.

“I’m one of the lucky ones,” said Teeter, a Tumwater resident. “I’m healing and I’m back to work.”

## Capitol gathering

Teeter shared his story Wednesday at the Capitol, where doctors joined local, state and federal officials to discuss health care access for the uninsured.

There are more than 600,000 uninsured people in Washington state, and 16,000 in Thurston County.

People without insurance tend to avoid the doctor’s office, and resort to emergency rooms when their health reaches a crisis point.

Emergency room doctors can offer an immediate fix at a high price, but not continuous care.

Last year, local doctors, hospitals and pharmacists banded together for a remedy. They created Project Access, which provides free care to uninsured patients earning less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level — about \$40,000 for a family of four. The project is supported by local government funding and donated supplies and labor.

In its first year, Project Access treated 244 patients. The aim is to serve 1,000 a year.

Rep. Brendan Williams, D-Olympia, called Project Access a “bright light in the midst of darkness.”

But organizers of four Project Access sites around the state said they face significant challenges, many of them financial. Williams said he would seek state funding to support the project. And Sen. Pat Thibaudeau, vice chairwoman of the Senate Health and Long-Term Care Committee, pledged to seek increased access, enhanced quality and cost containment in health care.

The challenges facing Project Access include recruiting volunteer doctors, dealing with insurance companies and securing expensive medical equipment, such as canes and artificial limbs that

start at \$3,000 each, said Stephen Albrecht, medical director of Thurston County Project Access.

Getting medication to treat illnesses is another costly item and consumes more than half of the Project Access budget. Generic drugs average \$12 a month, while brand-name counterparts cost \$80 a month. When brand-name drugs are a must, volunteers try to secure them through pharmaceutical companies' charity assistance programs but it's a lengthy, cumbersome process, Albrecht said.

"Providers can't do it alone," he said. "The program runs up against truly fixed costs."

Add to that the cost of interpreters at \$45 an hour. Doctors are legally required to provide an interpreter for patients whose first language is not

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English. A family member often does the translating, but it's difficult when it's a child trying to translate medical terms or discuss a

sensitive matter, said Felicia Boettger, an organizer of Project Access in Whatcom County. Her group is trying to gather a group of volunteer interpreters.

Lack of transportation and housing can complicate matters. Some patients live in rural areas without bus service, which makes it hard to get to a doctor's appointment. Others lack dependable housing.

"It's hard to get people from point A to point B if you don't know where A and B are," said Noha Gindy, executive director of the Thurston County Project Access. "When you're discharged, we need to find a place for you to go and sometimes it's not appropriate to send you back to a homeless shelter."