



## **Advocating Nationally, Acting Locally....The Need For Local Solutions to Healthcare Access**

By Chris Phillips and Regina Delahunt

The Whatcom Alliance for Healthcare Access (The Alliance) is a local community based group formed in 2002 to improve access to basic health services for all people in our county.

Since healthcare is a highly regulated service and over 60% of all health care (Medicare, Medicaid, Basic Health Plan and state and federal employees) is paid for by government resources much of the Alliance's effort, like many other groups, is focused on changing health policy at the state and national level.

Today over 14% of our population is uninsured and access to local health services is severely restricted due to a shortage of health care providers. Physicians are limiting their services or leaving practice all together because of sharply rising medical malpractice expenses, while at the same time reimbursement for their services is being held constant or in some cases cut.

There is agreement that legislative advocacy that promotes sound health policy is essential to address these issues long term but most also agree that nothing meaningful is going to happen anytime soon. In fact policy experts are predicting that the answer to our national health policy crisis will come from successful efforts piloted at the community level.

Fortunately, Whatcom County is a hotbed of innovation and collaboration. We are privileged to have caring citizens, committed physicians, forward-looking business leaders, and County and City governments that recognize the importance of a vibrant health care delivery system, and the value of working together for long term change and short term improvement.

Whatcom County recently applied for a federal Healthy Communities Access Program (HCAP) grant to develop an innovative *system* of care for uninsured and underinsured people of our community. The Whatcom Alliance brought together doctor, consumers, public health nurses, school officials, emergency room personnel, human service workers, community health center leaders, and representatives from faith communities to ask if there wasn't a better way to provide care for uninsured people in our community.

The HCAP grant application outlines some key components of an improved system of care for people who are uninsured, including:

- Consumer friendly outreach assistance and advocacy
- Coordination of care and case management across organizational boundaries for people with chronic illness and frequent users of hospital emergency services
- Centralized access to specialty care for uninsured people, using coordinated donated physician services
- Improvement of patient scheduling at community health centers and more coordinated physician recruitment to insure the capacity needed to better meet Whatcom County health care needs
- Development of a local fund that supports expanded healthcare access

What does all that mean? People who are uninsured will be able to contact someone locally (through their schools, non-profit agencies, internet or centralized phone number) to find out where to get care, what programs or insurances they might be eligible for and receive help getting care. Professional staff at the hospital emergency room and the community clinics will help patients secure the level of care they need after their visit to the emergency room. People with chronic illnesses will be able to receive some extra time and care aimed at helping them become more active participants in their own care. Specialty care physicians will work together and with the community health centers to provide uncompensated care to patients that qualify.

We are going to do more with the resources we have by implementing new scheduling practices that will increase the number of visits at the community clinics without adding new providers. And finally we are going to enhance the effectiveness of community physician recruiting efforts by coordinating a program that includes all medical practices and is supported by the Whatcom Economic Development Council and the Whatcom/Bellingham Chamber of Commerce.

Regardless of federal funding, the Alliance is committed to working with our partners to implement these changes and move forward to improve access locally. Starting in June we will:

- Convene a community recruitment and retention group that will include health care providers and local business representatives to oversee development and implementation of a coordinated effort to successfully recruit and retain needed health care providers.
- Work with the community clinics, the Interfaith Coalition and the Whatcom County Medical Society to develop a coordinated system to improve specialty care for the uninsured
- With our community partners implement a consumer outreach and referral network by coordinating with local agencies providing similar services and adding a centralized phone number supported by trained volunteers.

The ability of a diverse local group to come together, agree on a common goal and set aside their differences to make meaningful community change is powerful. The Alliance is just one example of such an effort. Advocating nationally while acting locally is the strategy for success in this battle to improve health care access for all.

If you want to join local efforts to improve health care access contact the Whatcom Alliance for Healthcare Access. Either check out our web site at [www.whatcomhealthalliance.org](http://www.whatcomhealthalliance.org) or call the St. Luke's Foundation at (360)671-3349 and they will forward your questions or comments.

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