

“A Community Response to the Crisis of Eroding Healthcare Access”

By Chuck Beard and Victoria Doerper

The Whatcom Alliance for Healthcare Access formed in 2003 in response to a growing health access crisis in our community...one that is turning Whatcom County into a community of health-care “haves” and “have nots.”.

The Alliance engages people from a broad range of professional and political backgrounds, from health care practitioners to insurance providers, consumers and business leaders to educators. It is sponsored by the St. Luke’s Foundation and supported by the Northwest Regional Council, St. Joseph Hospital, Whatcom County Health Department and the Coalition for Healthy Communities

As a diverse group, the Alliance is committed to the shared goal of making Whatcom County a community in which everyone has access to care. They feel a critical sense of urgency because of these troubling trends.

- **Local businesses are experiencing uncontrollable double digit increases in their health insurance costs annually.** The result is that some businesses are reducing benefits, shifting more costs to employees or dropping their insurance all together.
- **In Whatcom County, 13% of all adults are without health care coverage**—that’s over 15,000 people!
- **Nearly 100% of primary care physicians in our community have closed practices to new Medicaid, Medicare and uninsured patients** (an estimated 40% of the community). In other words, you may have coverage, but no doctor.
- **The community has a need today for over 20 new M.D.’s. to meet local demand.**
- **When access is limited people go to the ER.** Since 1998 the % of Medicaid and uninsured visits to the ER has grown to 42% of all visits...a 33% increase.
- **Finally, rises in medical malpractice premiums mean that in the last year, over a third of Whatcom County delivering physicians have stopped seeing new obstetrics patients.** Madrona Medical Group, the largest local multi-specialty group, experienced a 14% increase in malpractice premiums in 2003 with excellent claims experience. One local community clinic has received notice that liability coverage for nurse practitioners and physician assistants will simply not be available at all in 2004.

This health care “Perfect Storm” is complicated and challenging with implications for national and state policy makers and local officials trying to respond to the growing crisis. What we know for sure is that the solution to our health care dilemma is not an “either/or” proposition— the results (or lack of results) in our state legislature this last session confirm that. The Alliance believes that real progress is only possible with “bipartisan” policy changes that support community based solutions. Without this cooperative commitment Whatcom County will see more doctors leave our community, more women who have problems finding physicians to deliver their babies, and more children with no health care provider at all. We’ll see more seniors who have Medicare but no doctor who will accept it and we’ll see more small businesses terminating health plans for employees. This is not the kind of Whatcom County we want or deserve.

The Alliance is positioned to move forward in four key areas:

- 1. Improving access to care for Medicaid, the uninsured and underinsured**
- 2. Implementing a community based health care provider recruitment and retention program so we can keep the physicians we have and recruit the ones that we need.**
- 3. Continuing with an active legislative education and advocacy programming and**
- 4. Broadening community understanding and awareness of the issues and the possible solutions.**

Thanks to broad based community work meaningful changes that improve local access are being explored such as:

- Improving the coordination of care between community clinics and local primary and specialty health care providers
- Working with small business to identify affordable resources for employee health care coverage
- Streamlining administrative practices of private and state insurers so that the costs and frustrations associated with the growing paper work for health care providers is reduced and more resources are available to provide patient care.
- Implementing health care outreach, information and referral so people eligible for state programs are enrolled and stay enrolled.
- Working with state and federal elected officials to improve reimbursements for Medicare and Medicaid so the cost of care is covered and providers aren't expected to subsidize government programs.
- Working with consumers so that they seek care in the most appropriate and cost effective setting.
- Improving preventive services.
- Creating a single point of contact for community health care provider recruiting and developing a proactive retention program for existing providers
- Developing a community fund that combines public and private resources to support community access needs.

The key to success is broadening community involvement and commitment. If you want to know more about the Alliance's work, be added to the mailing list or become active in the process check out our web site at www.whatcomhealthalliance.org or call the St. Luke's Foundation at 671-3349.

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