

**HEALTH**

# Doctors to treat many uninsured in county for free

## 170 physicians sign up; nurse guides patients

MARY LANE GALLAGHER  
THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

An effort to help lower-income, uninsured people get specialty medical care has found help for more than 20 people, and is ready to help as many as 1,000 people this year.

Whatcom Project Access links uninsured patients with medical specialists willing to see them for free. And about 170 Whatcom County doctors have agreed to help.

"With very rare exceptions, everyone has said yes," said Sue Sharpe, co-director of the Whatcom Alliance for Healthcare Access, the coalition that houses Project Access.

That's life-changing news to the people who have gotten help through Project Access so far. They include:

A man who had just started a job when he broke a bone. He hadn't been on the job long enough to qualify for insurance.

A woman who received a stent for a blocked artery, improving her overall health.

A man who had a hernia repaired so that he could return to work.

Some of the patients who come to Project Access need medical care to work but don't have insurance because they don't have a job, said Nancy Stothart, a registered nurse who coordinates their care.

### WHO QUALIFIES

Project Access accepts patients who:

- Don't have health insurance, including Medicare or Medicaid.
- Are referred by physicians, including those in community health centers, the emergency room or private practice.
- Have a monthly gross family income of 200 percent or less of the federal poverty level, or about \$41,300 for a family of four.
- Have a primary care physician
- Live in Whatcom County.

Stothart works with the patients to make sure they're prepared for their visits to specialists, even arranging transportation if they need it. She makes sure they get the lab work they need before the visit — from providers who have also agreed to treat Project Access patients for free. She'll also follow up with patients after their appointments to make sure they understand what they need to do next and help them find affordable medications.

Providing patients those support services helps physicians, too, said Chris Phillips, co-director of the Whatcom Alliance for Healthcare Access.

"It's not that physicians didn't want to donate (care), but they've learned over the years, even if they do donate, patients aren't going to get pharmacy or lab services," he said. "It ends up being a waste of time."

Helping 1,000 uninsured, lower-income Whatcom County residents get specialty care this year would amount to a significant increase in access to health care, said David Hughes, executive director of the Interfaith Community Health Center.

"That's going to be really huge," he said. "One of the big issues community health centers have is trying to find specialty care."

Interfaith has an unofficial network of physicians willing to provide care to uninsured patients for free or very low fees, Hughes said.

"But you have to be really careful not to overload them," he said. "It's kind of a delicate relationship. You kind of rely on the kindness of strangers."

One of Project Access' promises to physicians is that they'll equitably distribute the patients among doctors, Sharpe said.

Dr. Tom Stackhouse, an ear, nose and throat specialist who helps recruit doctors for the program through the Whatcom County Medical Society, isn't surprised so many doctors signed up. Many doctors end up treating some uninsured patients for free as it is, he said, particularly patients who come to them from emergency room referrals.

"They were doing it anyway," Stackhouse said. "Now they're getting lots of support and assistance."

Project Access also works with patients to find health insurance they can afford. Most do, much to their surprise.

Of the 21 patients who went through the three-month pilot project, 20 were insured by the end. Most were enrolled in the state-sponsored Basic Health.

"A lot of the patients didn't realize they qualified for anything," Stothart said.

The logo for The Bellingham Herald, featuring the text "THE BELLINGHAM HERALD" in a serif font with a small mountain range icon above the word "HERALD".

[www.bellinghamherald.com](http://www.bellinghamherald.com)

---