

## Community group seeks solutions to health-care access at local level

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WHATCOM ALLIANCE FOR HEALTHCARE ACCESS

The June 14 Bellingham Herald editorial (“Uninsured problem plagues health care”) hit the nail on the head. The rising cost of health care and the growing number of people without access to health care in our community have become a crisis.

The good news is that there is a community based group in Whatcom County working to create solutions at the local level to improve health-care access today and working with our elected officials to implement health policy changes at the state and national level.

The Whatcom Alliance for Healthcare Access formed in 2003 in response to the growing health-care access crisis in our community.

With more than 15,000 people in Whatcom County who are uninsured, the impact on health-care access and cost of care in our community is significant.

And even if you have coverage you may still not be able to get health care. Nearly 100 percent of primary care physicians in our community have closed practices to new Medicaid and Medicare and uninsured patients because of poor reimbursement rates and administrative burdens.

The only way to make real progress is through bipartisan action. This past state Legislative session the Alliance worked closely with all of our state senators and representatives on a bipartisan agenda for needed health policy changes.

The Alliance, with other like-minded statewide partners, drafted SB 5703, “Preserving Private Practice Involvement in Safety Net Care.” The goal was to minimize barriers that private physicians face in providing care to Medicaid and uninsured patients.

The bill’s primary sponsors were Sen. Dale Brandland, R-Whatcom, and Rep. Kelli Linville, D-Bellingham, with the entire delegation signing on as co-sponsors to this important piece of legislation.

The bill didn’t pass in its original form, but thanks to members of our delegation, major elements of the bill were preserved, promoted, and approved as part of other legislative action. Those familiar with the pace of legislative change know that passage of key elements of SB 5703 in its first year of introduction amounts to unprecedented success.

The bipartisan commitment and support of our local delegation is what made it possible to make this progress. In particular, the primary sponsorship and leadership of both Brandland and Linville were instrumental. Both Brandland and Linville supported needed health-care fixes requested at the local level regardless of party politics.

That rare commitment and courage to support local community-based solutions is the only way that the hard work needed to solve the problems

of our health-care system is possible at the state and national level.

Although health policy changes are critical to achieving a sound and sustainable system, a lot can be done today to improve access locally. The alliance (with support from Whatcom County, the city of Bellingham, St. Joseph Hospital, the St. Luke's Foundation, the Whatcom County Medical society and the state Office of the Insurance Commissioner) is implementing Whatcom Project Access, a program that will:

- Improve enrollment in affordable insurance and government programs for those who are eligible.
- Improve access to primary and specialty care services, particularly for the uninsured.
- Reduce inappropriate use of the hospital emergency department.

In addition, Western Washington University's Small Business Development Center is working with the Alliance to recruit needed physicians and to assure that once they come to our community they stay here.

As The Herald editorial stressed, the key to making successful change is broadening community involvement and commitment. If you want to know more about the alliance's work, have you named added to the mailing list, or become active in the process, check our Web site at [www.whatcomalliance.org](http://www.whatcomalliance.org) or call the St. Luke's Foundation at 671-3349.

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