

## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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Contacts:

Lara Welker, Whatcom Alliance for Healthcare Access, [lrwelker@hinet.org](mailto:lrwelker@hinet.org), 360-788-6588

Dr. Ralph Peterson, Mt Baker District Dental Society, [rgpdds@gmail.com](mailto:rgpdds@gmail.com), (h) 360-384-6101;  
(c) 360-318-3009

### **“Project Access” Helps People Get Dental Care**

*New community-based program expands dental access for adults*

Low income community members now have another option for dental care, thanks to Whatcom Project Access Dental (WPAD). WPAD is a partnership between the Mt. Baker District Dental Society and the Whatcom Alliance for Healthcare Access (WAHA). The project has just received significant grant funding from the Washington Dental Service Foundation to implement this new partnership.

There are several dental resources in the community, including Interfaith Community Health Center, Sea Mar Community Health Center, and dental programs at Bellingham Technical College. However, they are not able to meet the growing demand for dental care, resulting in many adults not getting the services they need.

WPAD will help meet this need by linking volunteer dentists with low income, uninsured Whatcom County residents who need restorative dental care, such as fillings. Participating dentists will volunteer their time seeing patients in their offices during regular business hours. They will decide the number of patients they will accept each month.

“We are excited to be adding another option for adult dental care,” says Lara Welker, Program Manager at WAHA. “We know that there is a tremendous need for these services, and we greatly appreciate the generosity of local dentists that will make it possible to meet some of these needs.”

WAHA screens patients to determine financial eligibility, schedules initial appointments with donating dentists on a rotating basis, and provides care coordination for patients to assure appropriate use of dental services. Patients are required to pay a program fee of up to \$30 (sliding scale based on income) to help cover the cost of coordinating the program.

WPAD is similar to the Donated Adult Dental (DAD) program, a partnership between Interfaith Community Health Center and the Mt. Baker District Dental Society. The DAD program also serves low-income individuals, with services donated by dentists. The difference is that dentists volunteering with the DAD Program see patients one weekend a month at the Interfaith Community Health Center, while dentists participating in WPAD program provide services in their own practice during regular business hours.

“The WPAD and the DAD program are like two sides to the same coin,” says Dr. Ralph

Peterson, Executive Director of the Mt. Baker District Dental Society. "They have the same goal of providing dental care to low-income adults, but they offer dentists two different ways to do this. Some would rather donate an occasional Saturday; others prefer to work patients into their regular schedule."

Access to dental care for adults is a significant problem in Whatcom County. According to the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), in 2008 60,000 adults and seniors, or 37% of Whatcom County residents reported not having dental insurance to pay for all or some routine dental care. In January 2011, Medicaid eliminated coverage for all non-emergency dental services for adults, increasing the number of people who have no dental coverage for preventive or restorative care.

PeaceHealth St. Joseph Medical Center in Bellingham reported a 39% increase in the number of visits to the emergency department for dental care from 2001 to 2003 (Whatcom County Smiles, Whatcom County Department of Health, 2005). One of the goals of WPAD is to reduce the use of the emergency department for dental problems by creating an affordable option addressing dental problems before they become severe.

"Dental disease is painful and can lead to other serious health problems. Despite the fact that it is preventable, dental disease is a widespread health problem in Whatcom County, especially for low-income residents. We are pleased to support this new program," said Dr. Gerry Phipps, a Washington Dental Service Foundation Trustee. "We congratulate the groups involved for developing an innovative approach to provide much needed dental care for low-income seniors and adults. Preventing dental disease and increasing access to care not only improves health, it saves money for families, businesses, and taxpayers."

To be eligible for Project Access Dental, individuals must be a resident of Whatcom County, have no dental insurance, be low-income and have limited assets. People can apply for WPAD without a referral from another agency. WPAD only accepts people who need a restorative dental service. For patients seeking dental preventive care (such as a cleaning) or who have an emergent need (for example, infection or significant pain), WAHA staff will help them find other community resources.

To find out more about the program, please call WAHA at 788-6594 or visit the website at [www.whatcomalliance.org](http://www.whatcomalliance.org).

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