

**HEALTH**

# Group aims to ensure medical care for needy

**Project Access asks specialists to donate time**

**MARY LANE GALLAGHER  
THE BELLINGHAM HERALD**

Whatcom County physicians at Monday's medical society meeting will get a straightforward appeal to help make it easier for uninsured and low-income residents to see medical specialists.

Work for free.

The request will be from Project Access, a new program launched this week to improve access to medical care in Whatcom County, particularly for poor, elderly and uninsured people.

Organizers hope Project Access will be a go-to center for

patients hoping to find insurance or a doctor, as well as for doctors' offices needing help untangling Medicaid bureaucracy. Program staff members, including volunteers from the Statewide Health Insurance Benefits Advisors, will also help enroll low-income patients in Medicaid and other government-funded insurance programs.

## 'MEDICAL HOMES'

The overall goal: to find "medical homes" for more people who now

might head to the emergency room when they're sick because they don't have doctors of their own, said Chris Phillips, director for community outreach at St. Joseph Hospital. Phillips is co-director of the Whatcom Alliance for Healthcare Access, a coalition including private doctors, St. Joseph Hospital, community health centers and the St. Luke's Foundation, which organized Project Access.

## NO INSURANCE

Most private physicians in Whatcom County say low reimbursement rates make it financially impossible to take more patients on Medicare or Medicaid. Meanwhile, an estimated 13.4 percent of adults and 7.1 percent of children in Whatcom County have no health insurance at all.

"One way or another, sick people get care in our community," Phillips said. "They could end up in the emergency room, and they could end up having a physician who's on call" care for them. So doctors are already seeing many patients for free, said Whatcom Medical Society president Tom Stackhouse, an ear, nose and throat specialist himself.

"Not a day goes by that we're not squeezing someone in from the emergency room," said Stackhouse of his four-doctor practice. "I don't think I'm going to have any trouble

### FIND OUT MORE

For more information about Project Access, call 715-6531, or go to [www.whatcomalliance.org](http://www.whatcomalliance.org)

For help finding health insurance, call the Statewide Health Insurance Benefits Advisors helpline at (800) 562-6900.

convincing doctors to (participate in) a more organized system to see these patients who aren't insured."

Project Access will make sure the patients who need free care are distributed evenly so that no doctors feel like they're seeing more than their share. They'll also match the patients with a primary care doctor to make sure a specialist really is needed, and to supervise follow-up care.

The program will also track the free care provided by the specialists, and Project Access will use the data to show the community - and funding agencies - how much free care doctors provide.

Project Access is funded by a combination of grants and public money. The city of Bellingham and Whatcom County provided \$50,000 each. Other funding comes from St. Joseph Hospital, St. Luke's Foundation, and the Office of the Insurance Commissioner.

In addition to helping uninsured people get appointments with specialists, Project Access staff members will try to eradicate the administrative "hassle factor" of serving low-income patients

so that primary care doctor's offices will be able to care for more people. For example, Phillips said, 7,000 Whatcom County residents were dropped from Medicaid rolls last year because of a change in state law that required recipients to re-enroll every six months, instead of annually. The law has since been changed, Phillips said, but doctors' offices faced a bureaucratic nightmare with thousands of patients who didn't know they no longer had state insurance. Today, "access coordinators" with Project Access could help doctors' offices sort out problems like this, Phillips said.

"Instead of having your front desk spend 15 minutes trying to help untangle this mess," he said, "hand (the patient) the telephone and we'll do it for you." Wendy Carr, one of two access coordinators with Project Access, hopes to share a few "slam dunk" tips with medical office staff members to "minimize the pain" of seeing government-insured patients. "They'll be able to make a few more spots (for low-income patients) if they feel like they can navigate the system easier," she said.

Reach Mary Lane Gallagher at 715-2285 or [mary.gallagher@bellinghamherald.com](mailto:mary.gallagher@bellinghamherald.com)