



May 30, 2019

Dear Friends of WAHA and Whatcom County Community Members,

Services to be Closed

After a thorough and very difficult deliberation, the Board of Directors of the Whatcom Alliance for Health Advancement (WAHA) has reached a decision to cease providing services, and transition current programs to other organizations where feasible. The tipping point for this decision was the 33% reduction in funding available to this region's Lead Navigator Agency for the Health Benefit Exchange for the fiscal year beginning July 1, 2019. With the reduced funding and changing requirements, WAHA felt in good conscience it could not renew its application to be that Lead Agency, and the responsibility for enrolling people in expanded Medicaid and "Qualified Health Plans" will pass to another yet-to-be named organization effective July 1. Over the next several weeks, WAHA will work to transfer the other services it provides to other organizations in the community:

- Advanced Care Planning (coordination of community-based volunteers)
- SHIBA/BEC (Medicare and benefit enrollment assistance for seniors)
- Community Health Worker network convening
- Organizing for community health in the Sumas-Everson-Nooksack region of the County
- Northwest Life Passages Coalition Convening & Support
- Laurendeau Cancer Care Fund screening
- Behavioral Health Advisory Program screening & referral
- Access to Baby and Child Dentistry (ABCD)
- Convening the LGBTQ+ Coalition

WAHA's History

WAHA has for many years been a core agency assuring Whatcom citizens have access to affordable and appropriate health care. It began in 2002 when PeaceHealth, St Luke's Foundation (now Chuckanut Health Foundation) and the Whatcom County Health Department came together to convene stakeholders and organize the process of distributing charitable health care to people who needed it. WAHA also guided people through the often-bewildering processes of finding a doctor, becoming eligible for free care or insurance, and troubleshooting coverage issues.

When the Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare") was implemented in Washington in 2013, WAHA's role coordinating access to charitable care was enlarged to include enrolling people in the expanded health coverage available through Medicaid and subsidized private insurance, and providing support to other partner organizations doing enrollment in the five-county North Sound region. The work included enrolling persons released from jail, and promoting enrollment through schools, and in underserved communities. WAHA has performed this Lead Organization role over several years in the face of



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diminishing funds from the Health Benefit Exchange, which oversees enrollment in Washington State. It has been among the top performers in terms of enrollment people in Medicaid and subsidized health insurance. It has also been an innovator in developing Medicare enrollment and benefits assistance through its SHIBA program, recognized by the Office of the Insurance Commissioner as one of the best programs in the nation.

From its experience helping people navigate the complex healthcare world, WAHA also uncovered policy and service gap issues, and crafted innovative programs and policy proposals in response. WAHA has been a catalyst and a model for numerous positive developments, including:

- Several pilot care coordination programs for people who are homeless, have frequent police or emergency medical contact, have chronic illnesses, or have complex behavioral health issues, which led directly to the development of Whatcom County's recently implemented GRACE program;
- Transitional Care for Medicare enrollees from hospital to home, which PeaceHealth and the Federally Qualified Health Centers integrated into their operations;
- The creation of and support for the Oral Health Coalition, and the promotion of baby and child dentistry access for Medicaid families;
- Developing a blueprint for end of life and chronic health conditions, and convening the Northwest Life Passages Coalition to oversee its implementation;
- Creating a model healthcare transformation collaborative for Whatcom County, bringing together diverse stakeholders throughout the County to plan ways to improve healthcare, which then influenced State legislators and the Health Care Authority's design of its Medicaid innovation initiative;
- Implementing this region's Medicaid transformation project, which became the North Sound Accountable Community of Health;
- Advocating for the creation of the Incarceration Prevention and Reduction Task Force and the development of behavioral health services that would divert needy individuals toward care and recovery rather than incarceration;
- Establishing a nursing home administrators coalition to address issues common to their organizations;
- Convening a local healthcare provider organization to address issues related to health system transformation;
- Most recently, convening a group concerned about improving health services for persons who are LGBTQ+, and developing a healthcare resources list for persons in that community.

In many cases, other agencies have taken on these programs that WAHA initiated. In all this work, WAHA has embodied the principles of bipartisanship, neutrality, a community-based, multi-stakeholder approach, and safe-table problem-solving opportunities in its community work.

WAHA is very thankful for the support of PeaceHealth, Chuckanut Health Foundation, Whatcom Community Foundation, Whatcom County Health Department, and many other individual and institutional donors for their support over the years. We are also very appreciative of the many volunteers whose dedication and work above and beyond the call of duty have supported our board, committees and ad hoc work groups, our SHIBA program and our Advanced Care Planning program. Finally, we are so appreciative of the many staff who have passed through our doors and shown such

commitment to the people who have come to WAHA for help. They are the ones who helped us accomplish so much of what is described above!

But the work is not done.

Community Help Needed to Continue Support Services

People do not come to WAHA's door seeking only enrollment in Medicaid or private insurance, or access to the other programs WAHA is paid to screen for. They also come with challenges finding a doctor who will treat them, resolving denials of coverage, dealing with transitions of coverage between private insurance, Medicaid and Medicare, and finding help for the many needs related to health that we call "social determinants of health". Here are some examples WAHA's staff regularly respond to:

- "I can't find a doctor who will take Medicaid. Can you help?"
- "I can't get to my doctor's appointments because I have no car, I have to bring my children with me and take two buses, and it's too expensive on my income. What do I do?"
- "I can't figure out what health care is available to me; I'm an undocumented immigrant."
- "I was told I couldn't get a medical treatment I need because it's 'elective', but it's keeping me from going to work. Can you help?"
- "How do I find out about and enroll in other benefits I'm eligible for?"
- "What are 'spend-downs', and how do I satisfy their requirements to remain Medicaid eligible?"
- "What is a Medicare savings plan, and how does it fit my situation?"
- "I am on disability because of my mental illness, I can no longer see my doctor because they put me on Medicare, and I don't know what to do."
- "I need to see a counselor, but I don't qualify for insurance."
- "I can't find a counselor for my daughter, she needs to see someone soon and I can't afford to call each provider individually on my prepaid minutes, can you help me?"
- "I have balances at my doctors and the hospital I can't afford, even with my Medicare, can you help? They referred me to DSHS, who referred me to you."
- A school counselor asks, "I have a student whose mother is here with her and they need to see the doctor urgently but won't go because they can't afford it. Can we get the child enrolled in insurance? What does she qualify for without a Social Security Number?"
- "I just moved to Washington; can you help me get insurance? What do I qualify for?"
- "I am American Indian/Alaska Native, and I was told I can't access mental health services at a local community health center, why is this?"
- "Where can I see a doctor with my insurance?"
- "I just got out of jail and when I tried to use my insurance, they said I didn't have it even though I know I enrolled—how do I access services?"
- "My financial assistance application was denied; can you help me file an appeal?"
- "I keep getting a bill that says I don't have Medicaid AND Medicare, but I know that I have both, what is going on? Can you make calls on my behalf? Do I have to pay that bill?"
- "My doctor just prescribed a new medication, and I can't afford it."
- "I have lung cancer and don't want chemo. Can you help facilitate my passing?"
- "My purse was stolen, and my doctor told me that you could help me get my medications refilled."
- "I just got custody of my granddaughter, and I need help getting her insurance."
- "I don't have insurance, and I ended up in the ER this weekend. I don't know how I'm going to pay my bills."

- “My son has VA coverage, and no one will see him because of his insurance. He has bipolar disorder and depression and needs medication. Can you help?”
- “I just found out that my insurance coverage ended last year, and I need to refill my inhaler prescription today.”
- “Someone at DSHS told me that I have to pay for my medical care even though I’m low income. What do I do?”
- “My doctor referred me to a specialist, but they don’t take my insurance.”
- “My husband is turning 65 in May, but he’s already receiving hospice care. What is going to happen?”
- “I need to get my T-shot and my dysphoria is really high. My doctor doesn’t have any appointments open for the next two weeks. There are no other MDs in Whatcom that do this.”
- “How do I find a doctor who works with transgender people?”
- “I am having a hard time finding a counselor that is educated to work with Transgender folks.”
- “I am fleeing a domestic violence situation and am unsure what to do, where to go, or who to talk to. Can you help?”
- “I am a homeless minor and don’t know how to get the services I need”
- “I am pregnant and got a letter that my coverage was changing, what does this mean?”
- “I just had a child and lost coverage, I also want my child to have coverage, how do I do this?”
- “I just lost my job and coverage for my family, what are our options?”
- ...and many other examples too numerous to list.

These are services not clearly the responsibility of any one other agency in Whatcom County. Many of these questions come from people who have returned to WAHA for years, relying on us for help. It’s not required that the agency or agencies selected as the Lead Navigator Agency for the five counties in the North Sound region provide these services, yet these are services frequently requested by people in the community.

For that reason, WAHA will be convening a meeting of service organizations and funders before the end of June, to work through a process to determine how the Whatcom community will provide the advocacy, connecting and navigating service that WAHA has provided as a part of its basic insurance enrollment and access to care work. WAHA’s goal is to create a printed and on-line reference that will direct persons with service needs to appropriate organizations when its doors are no longer open to people coming for the services it has provided.

If you are interested in participating in the convening described above, or have questions regarding this announcement, contact Dean Wight, Interim Executive Director, at 360.788.6535 or e-mail dwright@whatcomalliance.org.

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 Whatcom Alliance for Health Advancement