

Op-Ed 2014

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THANKFUL FOR COMMUNITY COLLABORATION – TOGETHER WE ACHIEVE MORE

The term “collaboration” is widely used in our modern culture. But what exactly does it mean? According to Miriam-Webster online, it’s defined as “to work with another person or group in order to achieve or do something.” When you think about it, it really is a humble word considering the life-changing and community-building impacts that can be created from these joint ventures. Collaborations take ideas and turn them into reality. It’s a concept that brings groups together across sectors to unite for a common goal. This idea is the basis of United Way of Whatcom County’s work, and it’s why we are so excited at Washington Federal to embark on an amazing and unique collaboration that will benefit our entire community.

If you have been by our **Washington Federal** Cornwall Avenue office in downtown Bellingham, you have probably seen signs of construction. You see, a few months back, we entered into discussions with **United Way of Whatcom County**, **The Whatcom Community Foundation**, and the **Chuckanut Health Foundation** around the idea of shared community visions and shared goals. Each of these organizations was located in separate offices, but working on similar goals for our community, and we just happened to have a portion of our Cornwall Avenue office top floor that was currently unoccupied. What better use for this space than to provide these organizations an opportunity to combine their efforts and strengthen their work? And that’s when this new collaboration began to take form.

Here at Washington Federal, we take great pride being a rock-solid financial institution and a good community partner. The idea of shared space provided us the opportunity to develop a unique solution that would have a meaningful impact on our community. We made the decision to give each of the agencies a significant discount on their rent to further demonstrate our support. We knew that this investment would ripple out to touch the entire community through the combined efforts of these three wonderful organizations. Importantly, the tremendous respect we have for each entity’s leadership, including the three boards of directors, was a relevant factor in supporting this collaborative approach.

After we committed to this creative partnership, the three organizations began to discuss how the space could rise above mere office space and become an even greater asset for the nonprofit community. That’s when **The Whatcom Center for Philanthropy (WCP)** was born. Leadership envisioned a location where not only these three organizations would work, but where other nonprofits could gather in a shared conference room to develop their own collaborations.

The collaboration didn't stop there. The three organizations were able to take Washington Federal's support and leverage it to obtain support from members of the business community. To remodel the space, a variety of local companies contributed in-kind donations of office furniture, lighting, construction, HVAC systems, and much more! All of these businesses came together to help make WCP a reality.

This new landlord relationship is one more collaboration in Washington Federal's long history of supporting United Way's work. In fact, United Way has been the chosen conduit for the majority of our nonprofit contributions for decades.

United Way of Whatcom County has changed over the years, moving their focus to a more flexible and adaptable funding model that even further embraces collaboration to work with a variety of partners on key community goals. These goals focus on issues that are currently facing our community, issues in the areas of education, income, and health. They are already seeing results in terms of a decrease in homelessness, an increase in early literacy, and increased access to healthcare for the most vulnerable of our community members. Their work is made possible because of collaboration. Donors, supporters, and volunteers give their time and money and United Way invests in a variety of strategies and works with programs to move the needle on current community conditions. That's collaboration at its finest.

Right now United Way of Whatcom County is conducting their annual campaign and I invite you to join this effort and make a contribution to United Way today. Your gift to United Way of Whatcom County's Community Impact Fund will increase caps & gowns, ensure that families have a place to call home, and will ensure safe, healthy and active living. If your workplace offers a United Way Campaign, please participate and make your contribution to the Community Impact Fund. If your workplace does not offer a United Way Campaign, I encourage you to consider starting one. It's a great way to be part of exceptional community collaboration. If you would like to start a United Way Campaign at your work place, or if you would like to make a donation, call the United Way office at 733-8670 or check out www.unitedwaywhatcom.org.

This Thanksgiving week, I'm thankful for our amazing community full of organizations and people willing to come together to work on the same goals. I can't wait to see where our new collaboration will take us. We always achieve more together than when we go it alone because great things happen when we live united!

Thomas Kenney
Regional President, Northern Washington
Washington Federal

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