

## Op-Ed 2014

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### IMPROVING LIVES – TRANSFORMING CARE

As a society, we are fortunate to have access to great medical care: emergency rooms, hospitals, surgery centers, specialty clinics, and much more. But, when struggling with medical issues it can be a difficult task to navigate the waters of the health care system. It can be especially hard for individuals who need the most help to get the support that they need: people with substantial medical, behavioral health and social service needs who are in and out of our jail, hospital, detox centers, or emergency department. Often these people grew up in an environment with toxic stress, domestic abuse, child abuse, emotional abuse, or poverty. Years of living on the fringe of society has only further isolated them from the systems we have in place to help them. That's why we are working across sectors to bring hope and solutions to those individuals most in need, and why we are so proud to be a new partner with United Way of Whatcom County in these efforts to improve lives for all of us who live here.

To address this critical need, the Whatcom Alliance for Health Advancement (WAHA) started weaving together collaborations across medical, behavioral, social service, criminal and public health domains. We are building partnerships with the Whatcom Homeless Service Center, Interfaith Community Health Center, PeaceHealth St. Joseph Medical Center, Whatcom County Jail, Catholic Community Services NW, Bellingham Community Paramedics, Compass Health, and others. All of us are united to make a collective impact in Whatcom County and build a stronger system of care for the most vulnerable members among us.

We are all interconnected and when we reach out a hand to one, we influence the condition of all. When vulnerable individuals get the care that they need we all benefit in the form of less people using our emergency rooms, less tax payer dollars being used for incarceration or other social services, and more individuals who are productive and functioning citizens in our community. Our goals, just like United Way of Whatcom County's goals, are to work together with a variety of organizations to help these individuals and by helping them, we all win.

Together we have formed an innovative community-based intensive case management system. That means that we have a shared system to identify the most complex individuals in our community and enroll them into an integrated, community-based system of care. The great part about this concept is that it is a shared system, functioning both between and within organizations. We have already witnessed some great successes of our clients getting homes, jobs, and overcoming chronic medical conditions.

How does it work? Together we develop a single plan of care that is centered on each individual's goals and situation. Then, we assign responsibilities across our organizations to make sure those goals are met. We must work together and each of us must be accountable to one another and most importantly to our clients. For example, we may have a client whose goal is to recover from alcoholism, get off the streets, get dentures, and get back to work. His health goals would live with his case manager at WAHA and his other goals with his case manager at Catholic Community Services.

United Way of Whatcom County has three impact areas: Education, Income, and Health. For each of these areas they have specific community-level goals that guide their work. They know that it takes more than one organization to change these complex issues- that we all have to work together to have transformative, meaningful change in our community. The United Way goals in their Health area focus on ensuring healthy and active living, increasing health care access and prevention, and increasing safety from violence and abuse.

United Way of Whatcom County has been changing over the past years. Along with their new commitment to community-level goals, they have also created a more flexible and adaptable funding process. Thanks to this new process WAHA was able to apply for a grant for our intensive case management program from their Community Impact Fund for the first time this year. After going through a rigorous process involving submitting a grant, holding a site visit, providing information on our finances and meeting with their Fund Distribution Volunteers - imagine our excitement when we received the notification that we would be receiving funds from United Way of Whatcom County and through this new partnership we would be able to collaborate in new and interesting ways to impact our community. The intensive case management program is uniquely suited for United Way's support because it connects health care and prevention with other priorities, such as safe and stable housing (a goal in United Way's Income focus area). The bridging of these funding priorities is emblematic of the spirit of United Way of Whatcom County: together we can do more than any one of us could do individually.

We are all connected by a single system of care. United Way of Whatcom County supports multiple strategies and organizations all working together to improve this system so that it works better for all of us. When you support the United Way of Whatcom County, you are improving our health system too.

Right now United Way of Whatcom County is holding their annual campaign. I encourage you to join me in supporting this important effort. Great things happen when we live united.

Larry Thompson  
Executive Director  
Whatcom Alliance for Health Advancement

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## About the author

**Larry Thompson**  
**Executive Director, WAHA**

Larry is a graduate of Johns Hopkins and the University of Oregon. His more than thirty year career has seen him touch in one way or another nearly every sector of the health and medical care world. Holding leadership and

management roles in the public and private sectors, he has worked in public policy, in managing mainstream provider groups, in research and teaching, and in the health insurance sector.

**About Whatcom Alliance for Health Advancement (WAHA), [whatcomalliance.org](http://whatcomalliance.org)**

**Improving Lives, Transforming Care**

WAHA is a nonprofit organization with a mission that includes connecting people to health care and transforming our current health care system into one that honors and serves the entire community.