

Op-Ed 2013

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SUPPORT UNITED WAY TO ADVANCE THE HEALTH OF WHATCOM COUNTY

Recently the Whatcom County Health Department, United Way of Whatcom County, PeaceHealth St. Joseph Medical Center, and a variety of other community and government organizations partnered together to take a deep look at the issues affecting the health of Whatcom County. Through this Community Health Assessment (CHA) we learned a great deal about the variety of issues facing our community, and most importantly the information has allowed us to create a Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) that can serve as a guide for collective action where we live, learn, work and play.

People in Whatcom County are generally healthy, but despite this overall good health, there are challenges and disparities hidden among the averages. Poverty and adversity affect the health, well-being, and success of a significant proportion of our children and young families. Mental health and substance abuse are particular challenges for our community. Though Whatcom County is well positioned to respond to federal health care reform, there are basic issues of access that remain for certain populations.

Whatcom County is becoming older and more ethnically diverse. Service providers are facing major changes in client needs, resource availability, and requirements for accountability. Food and nutrition are seen as key focus areas and housing is increasingly recognized as a factor in good health.

From the assessment process, community leaders identified a set of strategic directions and priorities in order to improve health, reduce disparities and advance equity in Whatcom County. These include: 1) Building Community Connectedness and Resilience, 2) Enhancing Child and Family Well-being, 3) Promoting Healthy and Active Living, and 4) Improving Health Care Access and Service Delivery. These strategic directions, as well as specific goals, objectives, strategies and measures are outlined in the

Whatcom County Community Health Improvement Plan, also known as CHIP, and is available to download at: www.co.whatcom.wa.us/health/

The CHIP provides a framework that organizations and individuals can use to guide decisions about where to invest time, money and other resources to advance community health. It serves as a foundation for a shared community agenda. The plan focuses on a few key areas where we can concentrate collective attention to make measurable impacts on health and well-being. I was very excited to see that United Way of Whatcom County had restructured their goals and focus areas around the findings and vision of the CHIP and that they have taken a stand in order to be an important catalyst for change in the areas of Education, Income, and Health.

We are glad to have the support of United Way and to have them as partners in the important research of these issues affecting all of us in Whatcom County. Their support strengthens our community and strengthens our work at the Whatcom County Health Department and has helped to produce this assessment which provides an amazing opportunity for community change. Studies show that when more families are stable and healthy the economy is stronger, crime is reduced, there is less strain on our emergency rooms, less tax payer dollars are used for social services and support, property values improve, and everyone in our community benefits. When one person succeeds we all succeed, and that's why United Way of Whatcom County is partnering with a variety of programs and organizations to achieve specific goals in Education, Income, and Health. By providing hand ups and skill building opportunities, we can all thrive.

Right now United Way is conducting its annual campaign to raise dollars for the Community Impact Fund, the fund that is used to collaborate and invest in proven programs that are working together to impact specific goals in Education, Income, and Health. These are big issues, it takes a variety of programs and a variety of tactics to make a difference. United Way sees the bigger community picture, and with the CHIP, has the research to know how to create change. I invite you to make your contribution today. If we all pitch in and work on collective impact together we can build a stronger and healthier community for ourselves, our friends, and all of our neighbors. That's what it means to LIVE UNITED!

Regina Delahunt
Director
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About the Author

Regina Delahunt is the Director of the Whatcom County Health Department. United Way of Whatcom County runs 150 workplace giving campaigns during the fall to benefit Whatcom County's Community Impact Fund, which focuses on advancing education, income, and health. For more information about conducting a United Way workplace campaign, contact Kristi Birkeland at 360-733-8670. For more information on United Way of Whatcom County, go online at unitedwaywhatcom.org

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