

# Position Paper: Protect Existing Health Care Safety Net Programs

**The Legislature should continue to support the health care safety net to ensure that vulnerable Washington residents can get healthy and stay healthy.**

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State budget deficits continue to put pressure on critical health care safety net programs. Cuts to some of these programs within the past five years have taken a toll on people across the state. The success of coverage expansions, including the Medicaid expansion, has highlighted the benefits of a comprehensive health care safety net across the state. Health care savings from the adoption of Medicaid expansion have helped Washington State preserve other essential services and restore the adult dental benefit for Medicaid adults. Community health centers (CHCs) serve as the primary care safety net for the most vulnerable in our communities and protecting other safety net programs is critical to allowing our state to maintain a healthy safety net – including Medicaid, and other wraparound programs, such as maternity support services and interpreter services.

## **Medicaid**

In Washington State, Medicaid expansion has been the most successful aspect of the Affordable Care Act, successfully enrolling over 450,000 newly eligible adults in addition to adding more than 40,000 children to Apple Health for Kids. The decision to expand Medicaid was a key factor in reducing the number of uninsured in Washington from 16.8 percent to 10.6 percent. This expansion has increased access to more than 400,000 previously uninsured to the right care in the right setting, while decreasing inappropriate utilization of high cost services for preventive care. This has resulted in healthier communities while reducing uncompensated care.

While Washington has expanded Medicaid, our state has maintained comprehensive health benefits for all Apple Health enrollees. The state must continue to fund a health care safety net that includes important Medicaid benefits, like pharmacy and dental for adults. Medicaid adult dental was only restored in early 2014 and has increased access to services for more than 850,000 adults in our state. Plans and providers also must be paid adequately to ensure access to care.

## **Maternity Support Services**

Improving birth outcomes for mothers and babies is a priority for CHCs – with 15 CHCs throughout the state providing Maternity Support Services (MSS) and more than 20,000 women eligible for these services any point in time. MSS is essential to ensuring mothers and babies have a healthy start – providing enhanced health services to pregnant women as early as possible by increasing early access to prenatal and newborn care, and decreasing maternal morbidity and mortality, low birth-weight babies, and premature births.

Pregnant women with Apple Health coverage can receive MSS during pregnancy and through the postpartum period. Although services can begin any time during the prenatal, delivery or postpartum period, the goal of the program is to get pregnant women into the program as early as possible. It is essential that this program continues to be funded so that low income mothers continue to have access to early interventions that lead to healthy babies.

### **Interpreter Services**

Interpreter services are essential for patients not fluent in English or hearing impaired and their providers. Access to interpreter services removes a significant barrier for providers caring for diverse populations—ensuring that their Medicaid clients who are limited English proficient (LEP) or deaf and hard of hearing have access to needed services. While many CHCs hire multi-lingual staff, they cannot cover the needs of all of their patients without the help of the state's interpreter services program.

Beginning 2012, the state directed cuts of \$6.2 million to the system, developing guidelines for appropriate use of telephonic, video and in-person interpreting, and directing providers to use web-based tools to schedule appointments for services. It is important that there are no further cuts. Without these services many of these individuals would face significant barriers in accessing services and care.

### **Essential Services**

Beyond specific safety net health care programs, the state must continue to adequately fund essential services in our communities, allowing the most vulnerable in our communities to live safe and healthy lives. Health is only fully supported when individuals have access to nutritional food, permanent and stable housing, employment or other educational assistance and other necessary services. An added benefit is that these supportive services are often the entry point for other programs, including health care.

Washington State has made great strides in funding coverage and care for the most vulnerable individuals in our state. Despite tough budget times, it is essential that the legislature continue to recognize the importance of these programs and protect Washington's existing health care safety net.