



Position Paper: Protect the Existing Health Care Safety Net

The Legislature should protect the health care safety net to ensure that vulnerable Washington residents get healthy and stay healthy.

State budget deficits and the Affordable Care Act's (ACA) uncertain future is putting pressure on critical state health care safety net programs. Recent cuts to some of these programs are taking a toll on people across the state. At the same time, the success of coverage expansions, including Medicaid expansion and subsidized coverage through the Health Benefit Exchange, illustrates the benefits of a comprehensive health care safety net across the state.

Health care savings from the implementation of Medicaid expansion have helped Washington State invest in and preserve other essential services and restore the Apple Health (Medicaid) adult dental benefit. Medicaid gains from federal health care reform and wraparound programs, such as First Steps and nutrition and housing services, are essential to maintaining healthy communities. Now, these coverage expansions are at risk. Community health centers (CHCs) serve as the primary care safety net for the most vulnerable in our communities and protecting these and other programs is critical.

Protect Medicaid Enrollment and Benefits

In Washington State, Medicaid expansion is the most successful aspect of the ACA. Over 600,000 newly eligible adults are enrolled in Washington Apple Health and more than 90,000 additional children are enrolled in Apple Health for Kids. The bi-partisan decision to expand Medicaid was a key factor in reducing the state's uninsured rate from 14 percent to 5.8 percent. Expanding Medicaid increased access for hundreds of thousands of Washingtonians who now get the right care in the right setting at the right time, while decreasing inappropriate utilization of high cost services. This results in healthier communities while reducing uncompensated care.

At the same time that Washington State expanded Medicaid, it also maintained comprehensive health benefits for all Medicaid enrollees. The state must continue to fund a health care safety net that includes important Medicaid benefits, such as pharmacy and dental for adults. In 2014, the Legislature restored Medicaid adult dental coverage, which has expanded oral health coverage to more than 1 million adults in our state. CHCs stepped up to address the need for access when coverage was restored, serving 55 percent more patients in one year. Medicaid managed care organizations and health care providers also must be paid adequately to ensure access to care.

Maintain Essential Services Critical to the Health Care Safety Net

Beyond specific safety net health care programs, the state must continue to adequately fund essential services, affording the most vulnerable the opportunity to live safe and healthy lives. Good health outcomes can be achieved 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.

Maternity Support Services (MSS) and Infant Case Management (ICM) are two of the most critical of these essential services helping to improve outcomes for mothers and babies. Throughout the state, 15 CHCs provide MSS and 14 CHCs provide ICM through the First Steps program and nearly 23,000 women utilize these services every year. Investing in this program is essential so that low income mothers continue to have access to early interventions that lead to healthy children.

Preserve Gains Made Through Health Care Reform

Decisions in Washington State to expand Medicaid and develop a state-based Health Benefit Exchange position the state as a leader in health care reform. Our state's subsidized commercial marketplace through Washington Healthplanfinder is healthy and robust, and Washington Apple Health far exceeded enrollment expectations. Much of the success has to do with bi-partisan state level decisions, including the choice to create Washington Healthplanfinder as a portal to all health coverage eligible individuals, both Medicaid and commercial. Washington Healthplanfinder has proven to be an effective mechanism to enroll and renew coverage for more than 1.7 million Washingtonians – in both Medicaid and the individual market. Washington must protect the gains made through health care reform and continue to work to improve access to both Medicaid and commercial coverage for low-income individuals.

Washington State Cannot Move Backwards

Washington State has made great strides in funding coverage and care for our most vulnerable neighbors. Despite tough budget times and political pressures at the federal level, it is vital that state legislators on both sides of the aisle continue to recognize the importance of these programs and protect Washington's existing health care safety net.