



All people deserve the opportunity to live their healthiest life.



About the Nation's Community Health Centers

What started as a pilot project during President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty" is now a network of over 1,300 independent community health centers nationwide serving more than 27 million people, including one in every 10 children. As a Federally Qualified Health Center, Unity Care NW (UCNW) is part of the largest primary care system in the country and provides access to care regardless of insurance status or ability to pay.

About Unity Care NW

UCNW's mission is to provide access to high-quality affordable, primary medical, dental, behavioral health, and pharmacy services for all ages, regardless of the ability to pay. Since 2008, Unity Care NW has experienced a 74% increase in the number of patients and currently serves nearly 21,000 Whatcom County residents (1 in 10). UCNW accepts a variety of insurance plans including Medicaid and Medicare and has a Sliding Fee Discount Program to lower costs for uninsured families and individuals who are low-income or living in poverty.

UCNW is led by a qualified Board of Directors and a senior leadership team that includes the Executive Director, Chief Operating Officer, Chief Financial Officer, Chief Information Officer, Human Resources & Compliance, Planning & Development, and Clinical Directors. UCNW has a record of excellent performance in expansion of sites and services. Since 2009, the Board and Senior Leadership have purchased UCNW's principal health center site in Bellingham and completed three capital projects. These projects have allowed UCNW to expand the number of people served from 13,854 in 2013 to nearly 21,000 in 2017.

How have you engaged, convened, and maintained relationships with your community/communities?

Community collaboration is at the heart of all our work at Unity Care NW. We grew out of a community **partnership of concerned citizens**, medical providers, and the faith-based community. In the depths of the 1980's recession, these partners joined together to improve access to health care, and from those humble beginnings we have grown in to a large health center with multiple sites in Whatcom County serving 1 in 10 residents.

UCNW is an **active member** of the Washington Association of Migrant and Community Health Centers, the National Association of Community Health Centers, the Northwest Regional Primary Care Association, Community Health Plan of Washington – of which UCNW's **Executive Director is on the Board**- and the Community Health Network of Washington. UCNW has a **robust partnership with PeaceHealth St. Joseph Medical Center** (the local hospital) and collaborates with Compass Health (a local mental health provider).

UCNW is **one of two Community Health Centers** serving Whatcom County. The other is Sea Mar Community Health Center. Our two agencies work well together and support each other's growth in part because community **need exceeds existing services**. UCNW is a sub-recipient for Sea Mar's *Health Care for the Homeless* grant. Through this funding, UCNW employs a **Community Health Worker (CHW)** who works directly with those who are experiencing homelessness or are housing insecure. The CHW partners with local schools and homeless-serving agencies to **connect people who are at-risk** or experiencing homelessness to UCNW services. In addition, the CHW works with homeless youth in the school setting through the Advancing Community Connections with Engagement Support Services (ACCESS) program. This **peer-to-peer program** builds trust and breaks down barriers so that housing insecure youth can learn to advocate for their health and have access to crucial services they need to live a healthy life. Our CHW works closely with the local Homeless Outreach Team, which is a **partnership of local non-profits** that connects with individuals who are experiencing homelessness.

Our strong community partnerships include:

ACCESS Program– As mentioned above, our ACCESS program connects homeless youth with peers to encourage them to access crucial health care. We are working with local school districts to meet these youth where they are.



Mobile Dental Program – Studies show that if children learn good dental habits young and receive dental care, they are less likely to have dental issues later in life. With this in mind, we worked with the local school districts to create a Mobile Dental Program that visits local schools, daycare centers, and Head Start programs to provide routine dental care. The Mobile Dental Program staff provide exams, cleanings, fluoride treatments, sealants, and oral hygiene instruction.

Veggie and Park Prescription Programs – Currently, UCNW is working with the Bellingham Food Bank, local grocery stores, other health care providers, and health insurance companies to design programs that will allow our staff to “prescribe” fresh produce and time spent in local parks and outdoor spaces. These programs will serve and support individuals who need healthier lifestyle choices. The Veggie Prescription program will be funded through the Bellingham Food Bank, provided by our practitioners, accessed at the local grocery stores, and potentially reimbursed by health insurance companies -- truly a collaborative community effort.

PeaceHealth staff partnership – Unity Care NW employs a Hospital-Based Social Worker who is stationed at our local PeaceHealth hospital. The Social Worker helps individuals released from the hospital get connected with UCNW services. The position is supported by the local hospital and benefits both organizations and the community.

Early learning and child development – Unity Care NW staff have participated in several initiatives designed to improve health outcomes and educational opportunities for our youngest neighbors. This includes educational campaigns related to the effects of adverse childhood experiences and efforts to implement protocols among the county's health care community to screen for toxic stress to build resiliency for parents and their children.

Opioid response and prevention efforts – UCNW staff participate in a local task force that has helped to raise



awareness of and develop responses to the opioid crisis in Whatcom County. This group is made up of local non-profit organizations and government agencies.

Community meetings, coalitions, and committees – Unity Care NW staff participate in a variety of local boards/commissions, including the Bellingham/Whatcom County Commission Against Domestic Violence, the Whatcom County Housing Advisory Committee, the Whatcom County Coalition to End Homelessness, and the Public Health Advisory Board, as well as Chambers of Commerce and local groups such as Bellingham City Club, Sustainable Connections, and the Association of Fundraising Professionals.

Finally, our **Outreach and Enrollment department** is a community resource devoted to connecting with organizations and community members to ensure that those who need our services can access them. This department works with dozens of local organizations to enroll community members in health insurance, make appointments at our health centers, and provide general information about our services.

How have you co-designed or co-created solutions with your community/communities?

Federally Qualified Community Health Centers like Unity Care NW are required to have **Board oversight consisting of at least 51% patients**. This ensures that those who directly receive care are at the table shaping decisions about services and policies.

Staff from Unity Care NW participate in a variety of **community coalitions, committees, task forces, and action groups**. Our goal is to be at the table and learn from local groups while providing suggestions and insights as we work together to accomplish shared goals. When we are approached by another organization or when we see an opportunity to partner to achieve our goals, we begin by forming committees, conducting meetings, deciding upon goals and outcomes, and assigning actionable items.



Our upcoming **Veggie Prescriptions program** is a good example of co-designing a program. The Executive Director of our local Food Bank came to us with the idea of providing prescriptions for vegetables to our patients with health conditions that could benefit from an increase in fruits and vegetables. They invited our key staff members to help design and implement the program. After several meetings, and bringing in other groups including other health care providers, local grocery stores, and Community Health Plan of Washington, we are prepared to launch the program at the end of 2018.

Our staff was invited by the Health Department to participate on a local **Opioid Task Force**. Unity Care NW helped produce an awareness campaign called *Whatcom Has Hope* (www.WhatcomHasHope.org). This new website provides resources and information about the local opioid crisis and connects individuals with help for themselves or family members. The list of participating community partners can be found at the bottom of the first page of the website.

Unity Care NW staff were also founding partners of Whatcom County's **Housing Week**. This initiative demonstrates the connection between housing affordability, housing security, and homelessness facing our community. UCNW staff worked with three other agencies -- Sustainable Connections, Kulshan Community Land Trust, and the Opportunity Council -- to provide interactive and informative events



(films, panel discussions, Q & A for community members, tours of housing models) in November. The 2017 inaugural run was successful, and 2018 planning is underway.

How have you addressed systematic inequities that affect health (such as power differentials or racism) as part of your community engagement work?

Meeting people where they are is the primary way we address systematic inequities that affect health. The **ACCESS program** works with youth who are experiencing homelessness and connects with them at school to encourage access to health care. Our Outreach and Enrollment team is in the community at a **variety of events** and locations to identify individuals who are most in need and connects them with health insurance and care. We participate in events in **neighborhoods with high poverty rates** and underserved populations to ensure that all people in Whatcom County can access health care.



We leverage our **connections with the committees** and groups that we work with to engage individuals and families that are low income or in poverty. Lack of affordable, accessible housing aligns with poverty and underserved populations, which is why participation in **Housing Week** has been a successful way to connect with those experiencing power differentials. We also work closely with **Whatcom Literacy Council, Reach Out and Read** (which provides a free book when patients come in for their well child exam), and a local book store to provide access to education and literacy to break down power differentials affecting health and early childhood brain development.

The Veggie Prescription Program is another example of addressing inequities, ensuring that individuals with specific health concerns can access fresh produce no matter their economic level. Our **Mobile Dental Program** described above brings services to all children in Whatcom County which helps break down barriers for all economic and ethnic groups in our area.

What about your organization's way of working has made you successful? How has your organizational culture or structure changed to allow for authentic community relationships? Include examples of how your staff and your board (if relevant) contributed to the culture and values that enabled your success.

Unity Care NW's foundation was **built by community groups** and has a legacy of **partnering with other service agencies to improve outcomes** for Whatcom County. UCNW has a collaborative approach to our work, bringing in outside groups so that we can **learn from them** while providing support and information about our services.

At least 51% of the members of our Board of Directors are patients, who use our services. This provides the patient perspective in how we achieve our goals. **Empowering individuals of all economic levels** is core to the work that we do.

In the last two years, Unity Care NW has made it a priority to **grow our Planning and Development and Outreach and Enrollment departments** with the goal of creating more authentic relationships and connections in our community. The result has been an increase in staff to focus on community awareness-raising through public relations, marketing, fundraising, community outreach, and community health workers. All of Unity Care NW's **senior leaders are mission-driven**, focusing on the goal of providing health care to everyone. Unity Care NW works to **advance the conversation locally**. This ensures the mission goes beyond helping individuals, it extends to solving broader health issues **impacting all people in the community**.

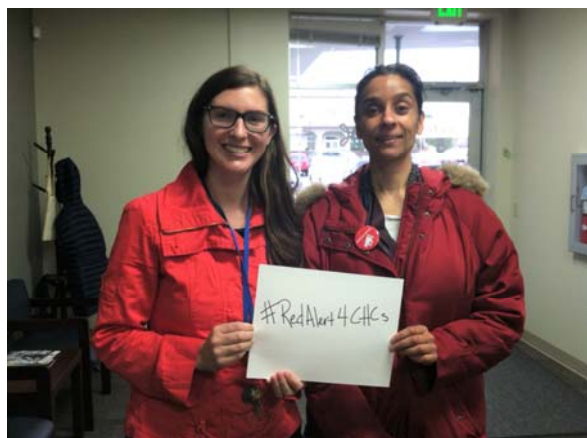
What have been your most significant challenges, obstacles, and missteps? We know that we can learn as much from setbacks as we can from successes, so please don't hold back! (If you are concerned about sharing challenges publicly, just let us know and we will omit your response to this question from the version we share publicly.)

While Unity Care NW strives to be a top-notch organization serving those most in need, there have been opportunities that have helped clarify and hone our organization's focus and communication with the community.

Change in utilizing volunteer dentists – In the past, Unity Care NW utilized dentists who volunteered their time to serve patients. This program was successful for many years. The community, and our agency, recognizes the generosity of time and talent from these volunteers. Over time, new regulations for dental practices made it onerous to both Unity Care and the volunteers to ensure compliance. Moving from volunteers to staff provided more control and oversight ensuring adherence with all regulations. UCNW could have managed this transition more effectively with volunteers by better communicating the need for this change. Unfortunately, there was some confusion about the decision that needed clarification.



Change in name – Three years ago, Unity Care NW changed its name from Interfaith Community Health Center to Unity Care NW to distinguish itself from the local Interfaith Coalition, a housing provider and one of our founding partners. The similar names caused confusion. Community members and patients were unclear about what services each organization provided, and if the two organizations were the same. Rebranding is challenging and can take several years of community re-education, which we are continuing.



Non-profit status – Many community members and patients don't know that we are a non-profit Federally Qualified Community Health Center. Educating the community that we are a not-for-profit health center has been a priority in the last two years so that we can increase local philanthropic opportunities for unfunded programs.

Political Advocacy – Though Unity Care NW has provided services in Whatcom County for over 30 years, only recently has the organization made a concerted and sustained effort to connect with elected officials and policy makers. When the Planning and Development department expanded

recently, advocacy became a priority. Raising awareness of our work among elected officials and policy makers is now part of our daily work. UCNW is currently expanding capacity in North Whatcom County and has received support from elected officials at the city, county, and at the state level.

What changes have you seen that give you hope about a future that is more equitable?

Since 2008, Unity Care NW has seen a 74% increase in patients and now serves 21,000 people in Whatcom County. More people receiving care means more people who can work, raise their children, and live healthy vibrant lives.

Since 2015, we have been able to say “You’re cured!” to **more than 100 people** who had been struggling with **Hepatitis C**. Thanks to recent advances in medication, individuals who once had an incurable disease can now live disease free.

In Whatcom County, there are ongoing **efforts to reduce homelessness** and housing insecurity which improves community health. Through task forces, coalitions, grassroots groups, and local government support, progress is starting to be made. There has also been huge momentum behind **improving early childhood brain development** and reducing toxic stress to ensure more children are able to grow into strong healthy adults. In addition, equity has a prominent place in strategies and programs that are adopted by local school districts, government entities, and non-profit organizations.

Unity Care NW is in the process of building a **new health center** in north Whatcom County that will expand access to 9,500 people. This project has been made possible thanks to local government support, donations from companies and individuals, as well as generous foundation grants. This **support that prioritizes health care** access to low-income people provides hope for a more equitable future.

