



## Position Paper: Protect the Health Care Safety Net

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

---

Washington State has been at the forefront of expanding health care coverage, including continuing its commitment to cover all Washington children through Apple Health (Medicaid), fully implementing the Medicaid expansion for adults, and ensuring the success of the state-based Health Benefit Exchange. Health care savings from the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and the Medicaid expansion have helped Washington State invest in and preserve health care and other essential services. This has made coverage options more available and affordable and, in turn, contributed to the state's historically low uninsured rate of 6 percent.

But a tight state budget and uncertainty around federal funding for critical health programs continues to put pressure on the health care safety net. Coverage expansion from both federal health care reform and state health care commitments such as Cover all Kids, First Steps, and nutrition and housing services are essential to maintaining healthy people, families and communities. Community health centers (CHCs) are the primary care safety net for our state's most vulnerable residents and protecting these and other programs is critical to ensuring they can continue to serve their patients.

### **Protect Medicaid / CHIP Enrollment and Benefits**

Following the Medicaid expansion in Washington State, over 570,000 newly eligible adults enrolled in Apple Health and more than 90,000 additional children enrolled in Apple Health for Kids. In addition, 53,000 children and 5,000 women receive health coverage through CHIP. The Medicaid expansion and CHIP have increased health care access for hundreds of thousands of Washingtonians who now get the right care at the right time, while decreasing inappropriate utilization of high cost services. This has resulted in healthier communities while reducing uncompensated care.

Washington State's uninsured rate for children is approximately 3 percent. To protect the significant strides we have made, we must ensure that our federal and state lawmakers protect access to health care for all currently eligible children in the state who rely on CHIP and Medicaid for their health care coverage. Federal funding for CHIP expired at the end of September, and Congress has chosen to pass an array of short-term funding measures rather than authorizing long term funding that would bring security to the children and families who rely on this program. Our state needs to stand up for children and ensure that their access to coverage and care is not disrupted, regardless of what happens with CHIP's federal funding.

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 dental and pharmacy coverage for adults. In 2014, the Legislature restored Medicaid adult dental coverage, which expanded oral health coverage to more than one million adults in our state. CHCs stepped up to address the need for oral health access when coverage was restored, increasing the number of dental patients served by 55 percent in a single year.

As dental services are transitioned from fee-for-service to managed care, and as the state implements a single preferred drug list in Medicaid, it is essential that these efforts do not negatively impact Medicaid patients' access to these crucial benefits.

### **Maintain Essential Services Critical to the Health Care Safety Net**

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

### **Preserve Gains Made Through Health Care Reform**

Washington State has made great strides in funding coverage and care for our most vulnerable residents. Despite tough budget times and uncertainty at the federal level, it is vital that state legislators on both sides of the aisle protect Washington's health care safety net.

Bipartisan decisions to expand Medicaid and develop a state-based Health Benefit Exchange have positioned the state as a leader in health care reform. Washington Healthplanfinder is healthy and robust, and Apple Health enrollment has far exceeded expectations. Washington Healthplanfinder has proven to be an effective mechanism to enroll and renew coverage for nearly 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 coverage and care.