
Washtenaw Health Initiative

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Washtenaw County leaders develop, implement recommendations to shrink health care service gaps

Partnership between county health plan and Department of Human Services (DHS) connects DHS workers with clients, improves Medicaid enrollment process

ANN ARBOR, Mich.—The Washtenaw Health Initiative—a collaborative group of Washtenaw County community leaders and organizations that has worked together on a voluntary basis over the past year to improve access to health care for the county's low-income, Medicaid, and vulnerable populations—announced today that it has helped more than 700 people in Washtenaw County obtain or keep Medicaid coverage or obtain access to other critical social supportive services.

The WHI estimates that about 6,400 Washtenaw County residents are currently eligible for, but not enrolled in Medicaid, and as many as 25,000 residents could become newly eligible if the federal health care reform act remains in place.

Helping improve the Medicaid enrollment process ahead of the projected influx, two employees with the Washtenaw County office of the Michigan Department of Human Services (DHS) were selected to work out of the Washtenaw Health Plan (WHP) office, addressing issues that include enrolling clients for Medicaid and public assistance benefits to correcting client contact information. The DHS workers see clients at the WHP offices and make weekly visits to the Delonis Center, the county's largest homeless shelter. The Corner Health Center was recently added to the workers' weekly rotation of visits, with plans to expand to other clinics in the future.

"The amount of time that these DHS workers devote to solving the myriad issues clients face is staggering. They are getting to know the clients in ways not possible without their work in the community and they are sorting out very complex issues in the human services system. They've helped hundreds of people in some way," says Ellen Rabinowitz, executive director of the Washtenaw Health Plan. "This has been a phenomenal partnership."

The move gives the DHS workers—Tiffany Gore and Liz Ahrens—direct access to community members who are at risk of losing their Medicaid coverage or public assistance benefits as well as those who may be eligible for assistance but not yet enrolled. Through remote access to the DHS eligibility system, Gore and Ahrens can make immediate updates to an individual's file or identify eligibility for other assistance.

Among other things, Gore and Ahrens's efforts since September 2011 include:

- Helping more than 200 single, childless adults at risk of losing Medicaid coverage maintain that coverage.
- Enrolling more than 200 people in the state's Food Assistance Program.
- Helping 261 people apply for medical assistance, 69 for state disability assistance, and 22 for emergency relief for services like heating and utility assistance.
- Assisting more than 200 people at the Delonis Center.

"The Washtenaw Health Plan is the envy of every other county health plan because our Adult Medical Program numbers are increasing; this is unprecedented in a period of closed enrollment. Because of the systems put in place by the two DHS workers and the Washtenaw Health Plan enrollment staff, we are able to contact members well before their enrollment is terminated, and as a result, help them stay enrolled," says Rabinowitz.

While the fate of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (the federal health care reform act) will be decided by the U.S. Supreme Court later this year, the success of the DHS and Washtenaw Health Plan partnership shows that there is a lot communities can and should do today to improve the health of residents, according to Robert Guenzel, a retired Washtenaw County administrator and co-chair of the effort.

“If federal health care reform is repealed, there will still be community members who can’t access the care they need. There will still be those who are eligible but not enrolled in programs like Medicaid. There will still be a need—and perhaps it will be even greater—for communities to work together on improving care for its citizens,” says Guenzel.

Guenzel, along with retired Saint Joseph Mercy Health System chief executive officer Robert Laverty and retired University of Michigan treasurer Norman Herbert, spearheaded the WHI; the initiative is sponsored by the University of Michigan Health System and Saint Joseph Mercy Health System, and staffed by the Center for Healthcare Research & Transformation based at the University of Michigan.

The WHI kicked off in January 2011 with an evaluation of the county’s current demographics, Medicaid eligibility and enrollment process, and health care delivery systems with a focus on primary, mental health, dental, and substance use care. Results were released in July 2011 as the group moved into identifying recommendations to close the identified gaps.

Recommendations were completed by September 2011. In addition to this enrollment outreach partnership between the WHP and the State’s Washtenaw County Department of Human Services, the group is in the process of implementing 10 other recommendations focusing on both helping people obtain and keep insurance coverage as well as getting access to needed primary care, dental, substance use, mental health, substance use, and human services.

Since the group’s official formation, WHI membership has expanded from 40 individuals representing 20 organizations to 70 individuals representing more than 30 organizations. The WHI includes representatives from the Ann Arbor-based Center for Healthcare Research & Transformation, U-M Health System, Saint Joseph Mercy Health System, VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System, health plans, county government, community services, physicians, and safety net providers.

For more information on the WHI, visit www.washtenawhealthinitiative.org.

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The Washtenaw Health Initiative is a voluntary, county-wide collaboration focused on how to improve access to coordinated care for the low-income, uninsured, and Medicaid populations. The work of this group is on both how to improve care today for these priority populations and on 2014, when federal health care reform is expected to be more fully implemented. The effort is facilitated by the Center for Healthcare Research & Transformation and includes representatives from the University of Michigan Health System, Saint Joseph Mercy Health System, VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System, health plans, county government, community services, physicians, and safety net providers. Members are focused on building partnerships and identifying collaborative action that can move the county toward its ultimate goal: improving the health of its citizens now and in the future. For more information, visit www.washtenawhealthinititative.org.