State Budget Eliminates Health Insurance for at least 35,000 people
Leaves thousands more on wait list to nowhere

Seattle, WA, April 27, 2009 – Washington State lawmakers failed to protect health insurance and critical health care programs for the state's most vulnerable populations in the budget finalized this weekend. The new budget, passed by the State House and Senate and delivered to Governor Gregoire on Sunday, cuts $1 billion from health care programs, nearly one quarter of it from the community health center system. It cuts 35,000 people from the Basic Health program, lowers Medicaid rates and reduces access to safety net providers and cuts the General Assistance-Unemployable (GA-U) Medical Program by $43 million (17%).

The massive $236 million cut to Basic Health means that about 35,000 people will lose their health insurance by the end of 2009. The Health Care Authority (HCA) is now tasked with disenrolling or "kicking" people off Basic Health in order to meet new budget guidelines. Medicaid cuts mean that low-income women and children who rely on the program will have a harder time finding a pediatrician or family doctor to care for them. It is not yet clear how many GA-U enrollees will lose health care services.

Together, rising unemployment and these unprecedented cuts will swell Washington's uninsured population by 150,000 for a total of nearly 900,000 by 2010. Community health clinics and hospitals will have to absorb the rising number of uninsured people. However, without sufficient funding to offset costs, clinics will have to lay off health care providers and support staff and patients will face increased wait times for services. Hospital emergency rooms will be flooded with uninsured people who can only pay for a fraction of the cost of their care.

"It is disappointing that state lawmakers have thrown up their hands rather than rolling up their sleeves to find creative ways to maintain health care programs for the most vulnerable people in our state—the poor, unemployed, elderly and disabled," said Lance Hunsinger, CEO of Community Health Network of Washington (CHNW). "Each month we're seeing thousands of people lose their jobs and health coverage. This could be any of us and the Basic Health program, which is our safety net, has just been yanked out from under us. There are already 18,000 people on the Basic Health wait list who have little hope of getting on the program. As unemployment grows and more people lose their coverage, they'll end up at the end of this growing line."

Community health clinics are our state's primary care safety net—they are the only type of provider besides hospital emergency rooms that is required to see all patients, regardless of their ability to pay. Community health clinics are the health care home for 600,000 people in Washington, including one quarter of the uninsured population. Community clinics are now faced with absorbing an additional ~$125 million per year with the loss of previously insured patients and lower rates for state programs.

"The consequences of this budget will be felt immediately and last for many years to come," said Mary Looker, CEO of the Washington Association of Community & Migrant Health Centers (WACMHC). "Thousands of people will lose their health coverage, private insurance rates will go up, and sadly, people will be diagnosed with diseases at later stages when there is no hope for treatment. Community health clinics will still see all those who lose their insurance, but they will lose access to specialty and hospital care, and face catastrophic health costs."

"Despite our best advocacy efforts, these health care cuts cannot be healed until the next legislative session," said Lance Hunsinger. "But we know first hand that uninsured people in Washington can't wait."

ABOUT US

Community Health Network of Washington (CHNW)

Founded by community health centers in Washington State, CHNW is a community health center-based delivery network, whose mission is to improve the health status of our communities through the provision of high-quality, affordable, community-based health care to underserved individuals and families.

The Washington Association of Community & Migrant Health Centers (WACMHC)

WACMHC is a non-profit organization, formed in 1985, to advocate on behalf of the low-income, uninsured, and underserved populations of Washington State served by community health centers. These health centers serve low income and other persons with limited access to health care.

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