



County gathers medical community to transform health care

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While the U.S. Senate on Tuesday was busy passing its health-care reform bill, more than 140 people gathered at the Lynnwood Convention Center to learn about and debate an effective health-care reform program going on right now in the Puget Sound region.

Snohomish County Executive Aaron Reardon and Executive Director Mary McWilliams of the **Puget Sound Health Alliance** brought together some of our state's best and most authoritative medical professionals and medical-care leaders under one roof. Tuesday's discussion revolved around a transformative new program provided through the working partnership of the members of the Puget Sound Health Alliance.

"Being healthy is not just living right, eating right or exercising. Health care is much more complicated than that," Reardon said in his opening statement. "This is not the conversation on health care we have seen on television. We recognize that the issue of health is local and that it can only improve when each of us understands our roles and accepts responsibility for keeping ourselves and our communities healthy."

According to McWilliams, the Alliance's annual **Community Checkup is the driver of the local health-care transformation**. The Community Checkup is a report that provides information critical to evaluating the value and quality of medical care in our region. "The Community Checkup is increasingly being implemented by many of our local governments, nonprofits and local businesses, and it is showing positive results," McWilliams said. "Bottom line is that improved medical care is increasing the quality of local health care while either containing or driving down costs. Everyone wins."

Dr. Jeff Harris, of the University of Washington's Health Promotion Research Center, provided the keynote, speaking about a "Prescription for Change" and how individuals, businesses and health-care providers are linked and play an important role in the success of health-care reform. Harris discussed the importance that employers can play in improving employee health care. Specifically, research has shown that when employers provide on-site seasonal flu shots, absenteeism rates decline by 30 percent. In addition, when an employer's health-care program provides high-value medications to employees at no cost, patients take the medications on a regular basis, which in turn reduces hospitalizations and cost.

A panel discussion -- featuring Dr. Albert Fisk, Everett Clinic; Dr. Joseph Gifford, The Regence Group; Dr. David McCullough, Group Health; and Dr. Lawrence Schechter, Providence Regional Medical Center -- focused on the importance of holistic and evidenced-based care in improving outcomes, quality and access while reducing costs. A second panel discussion -- featuring Marilyn Guthrie of Recreational Equipment, Inc., Theresa Helle of The Boeing Company, Jim Messina of Premera Blue Cross and Julie McDowell of the Association of Washington Cities Employee Benefit Trust -- spoke about the trials and successes of the innovative program.

“We can’t wait for Congress to change the health-care system, we have to take control of local issues,” Reardon has said. “There isn’t one organization that can fix the system. Companies, unions, employees and the medical community all have a role.”

Tuesday’s summit was the fourth in a series of global competitiveness summits hosted by Reardon and the Snohomish County Executive Office. Health care and education have consistently made it to the top of the list of issues most critical to helping companies grow their businesses while competing for market share in a global economy.

To find out more about the Puget Sound Health Alliance, go to www.pugetsoundhealthalliance.org . The Alliance produces the “Community Checkup” report, comparing health care in the region. To view the report, go to www.WACommunityCheckup.org.