



Seattle-area Group Earns First Federal 'Community Leader' Designation

By Neil Versel, contributing editor

A Seattle-area collaborative of health providers, payers, business interests, local government, and consumers has become the first organization in the nation to earn federal designation as a "community leader" in value-driven healthcare, making the group eligible to receive Medicare performance data for local, public outcomes reporting.

Having access to Medicare data will lead to more complete, accurate reporting on quality and efficient care in the Seattle market, according to Diane Giese, spokeswoman for the [Puget Sound Health Alliance](#).

The alliance, which already is compiling data from health plans and major self-insured employers in the Puget Sound region including [Starbucks Coffee](#) and [Boeing](#) expects to issue its first reports by midyear, according to Giese. "We plan to update the reports quarterly," Giese adds.

Initially, reports will gauge healthcare providers on 23 nationally accepted ambulatory quality measures and an undetermined number of inpatient benchmarks, Giese says, and additional measures will be added over time. "This is an evolution," she explains.

It is unclear when Medicare data will become available, as the [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#) (HHS) still is working out the logistics of sharing information on specific healthcare providers while making sure the information is both compatible with private-sector reporting programs and also credible. "Providers and employers don't want competing reports," Giese says. "They want one report they can trust."

However, the federal designation indicates that the Puget Sound Health Alliance is at the front of the line once the [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services](#) (CMS) is ready to release the Medicare data beyond six pilot sites in Massachusetts, Indiana, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Arizona, and California.

To earn the recognition, the alliance pledged to support the four HHS ["cornerstones" of value-driven healthcare](#): information technology for smooth yet secure exchange of healthcare data; information on the quality of care delivered; accurate healthcare cost information; and high-quality, cost-effective healthcare.

According to Giese, the Seattle alliance won early approval from HHS in part because its membership includes healthcare providers like [Group Health Cooperative Health Care System](#) and [Virginia Mason Medical Center](#), not just payers and purchasers. "One of the reasons why we stand out is from Day 1, the Puget Sound Health Alliance has involved all stakeholders," Giese says.

State and local government also play a major role in the organization, whose chairman is King County Executive Ron Sims. At last week's announcement of the HHS designation at Starbucks headquarters, Washington governor Christine Gregoire said that she is asking for \$2 million in state funds to support the alliance's public reporting and quality improvement efforts in the next state budget cycle, 2007 through 2009.