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Federal recognition for Puget Sound Health Alliance Agency honors group's efforts to cut costs, improve care

By [CHERIE BLACK](#), Seattle Post-Intelligencer January 4, 2007

The **Puget Sound Health Alliance** on Wednesday was named the first organization in the country to become a part of a national network aimed at providing affordable health care and improving patient care.

The Health Alliance was formed locally two years ago to achieve the same goal. It describes itself on its Web site (pugetsoundhealthalliance.org) as a "partnership involving employers, physicians, hospitals, patients, health plans, and others working together to improve quality and efficiency while reducing the rate of health care cost increases across King, Kitsap, Pierce, Snohomish and Thurston counties."

The organization was named a Community Leader for Value-driven Health Care by Health and Human Services Secretary Mike Leavitt, which means it will collaborate with local health care providers and consumers to figure out how to reduce costs and improve care. It also means the Health Alliance will support four national health care goals on the local level. The goals include replacing paper records with electronic medical records so patient health information is more easily available and establishing a comprehensive way to see which doctors and hospitals are doing the best job.

The other goals call for patients to be able to compare cost and quality of care when choosing routine and elective procedures and providing incentives to health care providers for low-cost quality care, or offering insurance options that reward consumers who make choices based on quality and cost.

"Decades of national talks on health care go nowhere while the consumer suffers," said King County Executive Ron Sims, chairman of the Health Alliance. He joined Leavitt and Gov. Chris Gregoire for the announcement at the Starbucks Center in Sodo. "This will create a table of providers and plans and fashion a system of health care that optimizes the best care possible," he said.

Gregoire wants \$2 million in her proposed 2007-09 budget to help the Alliance expand its public reporting and other quality improvement work statewide. "We're arming consumers with real information and real data they'll have in their hands," Gregoire said. Area health care and business leaders, including Starbucks, Premera Blue Cross and Group Health, signed a letter after Wednesday's announcement pledging to support the four goals.

The designation also allows the Health Alliance to access Medicare data to use when reporting health care performances. The Health Alliance has begun putting together data from health care insurers and self-insured employers in the region, Sims said, and expects to produce the first comparison reports this year.

The Health Alliance's community leader status expands a national pilot program, which covers six regions, including Boston, Minneapolis and Phoenix, all of which support the four goals.

The bottom line for consumers is that they eventually will have a way to compare their health care needs with the cost and performance and decide who and where they want to go to be treated.

"Within two years you will begin to see information on limited procedures, within five years the word value will be a regular part of our discussion," Leavitt said. "Within 10 years, this is the way health care will work."