

Sunday, March 30, 2025

The Seattle Times

Everyone Deserves the Healthcare They Need, When They Need It.

*By Christine Lindquist, Executive Director of Washington Healthcare Access Alliance (WHAA)
Francisca Schwarz, Project Director of Seattle/King County Clinic and WHAA Board Trustee*

Healthcare is a fundamental human need, like housing or food, yet for many people in King County and across our state, it remains out of reach. In Washington, nearly half a million people are uninsured, and many more are underinsured. Nationally, the rising cost of care and reduced health insurance options have left millions struggling to access even basic services. This is not just a policy failure; it's a crisis impacting entire communities.

At Seattle/King County Clinic, the largest clinic of its kind in the United States, this crisis is seen firsthand. Every year, thousands of people line up for hours for a chance to receive free healthcare during the four-day event. Patients hail from over 186 zip codes, use 50 different languages, and come from all walks of life. These individuals are our neighbors: they are families, seniors, students, veterans, immigrants, and wage earners struggling with the high cost of living. Many are part of the 'missing middle'; those who make too much to qualify for subsidized care, but not enough to afford the services they need. In Washington, the income cap to qualify for Medicaid is just over \$20,000 a year, leaving many in healthcare limbo. But the barriers they face are not just financial. They include a lack of healthcare facilities, providers, and appointment availability, restrictive insurance plans, language barriers, and access to transportation. When people cannot access preventive care, minor health concerns escalate into serious conditions, leading to unnecessary suffering, financial hardship, long term injury, illness, and preventable deaths. The good news is that in the face of systemic failures, when we come together as a community, we can make a real difference.



Each year, the Clinic unites healthcare organizations, civic agencies, nonprofits, businesses, and thousands of volunteers to deliver free dental, vision, medical, and social services to individuals who face barriers accessing and affording essential health services. Over the past nine years, Seattle/King County Clinic has served 30,000 patients and provided more than \$26 million in direct care. The Clinic is a testament to the power of collective action, proving that when we prioritize care over cost, lives are changed.

While Seattle/King County Clinic is a large-scale example, across the state free clinics operate year-round in many communities, using volunteers and partnerships to bridge healthcare gaps. But let's be clear: these gaps should not exist. Access should not be dependent on geography, employment status, or income level. And no one should have to wait for a once-a-year event to get healthcare in one of the wealthiest countries in the world.



On April 7, World Health Day, local landmarks and buildings will be lit green in recognition of Access to Healthcare Day, reminding us of the urgent need to address this crisis and work towards a future where healthcare is truly accessible. This is a moment to speak up and urge policymakers to protect the public programs we have like Medicare and Medicaid and address systemic issues such as provider shortages and prescription drug prices. It is also a time to support local organizations that provide essential healthcare services.



The impact of accessible healthcare is clear. When people receive regular medical checkups, chronic diseases like diabetes and hypertension can be managed before they become life-threatening. When dental issues are addressed early, they don't turn into infections that require emergency care. When vision problems are corrected, children can succeed in school, and adults can maintain employment. A healthy community is a stronger community.

While we wait for meaningful policy changes at the federal and state levels, we cannot afford to stand still. We must continue to come together as a community to provide care and advocate for systemic change. Free clinics across Washington will continue serving their communities, as they have for decades. But it will take all of us to address this crisis. Whether you volunteer, donate to local causes, or use your voice to advocate for change, you play a role in ensuring that healthcare is not a privilege reserved for the few.

At the end of the day, access to healthcare isn't just about individual well-being - it's about the health and strength of our entire community. And that's something worth fighting for.