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CHOICE Navigator Network Exceeds Health Coverage Enrollment Goal in State's First Open Enrollment Period under Affordable Care Act

OLYMPIA – The State's first open enrollment period for health insurance ended this week, on March 31st, after six months of sign-ups. With the close of open enrollment, CHOICE and other enrollment support organizations celebrate not only meeting, but exceeding their original target of enrolling 6,520 individuals into health insurance across a seven-county region. Statewide, nearly half a million individuals enrolled into health coverage through *Washington Healthplanfinder*, Washington State's online enrollment tool.

CHOICE was tapped last summer to serve as one of ten Lead Organizations in the State for the Washington Health Benefit Exchange's customer service program. The In-Person Assister program, which was designed to provide outreach and education about health coverage through the Affordable Care Act, was also tasked with helping consumers sign up for coverage when enrollment began in October last year. CHOICE's role as a Lead Organization focused on assembling a network of In-Person Assister organizations in seven counties, including Clallam, Jefferson, Grays Harbor, Lewis, Mason, Pacific, and Thurston, and providing training and ongoing support as consumers were assisted by "In-Person Assistors" or "Navigators".

The first several months of enrollment proved challenging, as the online enrollment tool, *Washington Healthplanfinder*, experienced technical difficulties which resulted in long application processing times and other technical challenges. Navigators saw an immediate influx in demand for services, as people who tried to apply on their own experienced technical difficulties and turned to Navigators for help. "Health reform is an incredibly complex topic to begin with," said Libby Weisdepp, CHOICE's In-Person Assister Program Manager, "but adding technical challenges on top of assessing who is eligible, the new application process, and how the new system of coverage works was harder than anyone originally imagined."

Despite these initial difficulties, organizations serving as Assistors, including local hospitals, public health departments, health centers, and community-based organizations proved highly effective. Within merely five months, the CHOICE network of assister organizations met and indeed exceeded the 15-month enrollment goal for the region. "This success is due in large part to the tremendous tenacity and personal commitment of the many In-Person Assistors who were undaunted by the technical challenges they experienced when the program was launched. No one had ever implemented such an ambitious program. We all learned a lot", says CHOICE Executive Director Winfried Danke.

While new enrollments into health insurance are on hold until the next open enrollment period later this fall, the CHOICE navigator network is busy continuing to enroll individuals and families that qualify for Medicaid. Medicaid enrollments are ongoing throughout the year; there is no cut-off date.

Over the coming weeks, the CHOICE In-Person Assister network will redouble its outreach to the community, especially to hard-to-reach individuals, such as homeless, low-income, and rural residents. "We want to make sure that everyone who is eligible for health coverage gets enrolled", says Danke.

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About CHOICE Regional Health Network

CHOICE Regional Health Network is a nonprofit collaborative of member organizations dedicated to improving community health in Central Western Washington through collective planning and action of health care leaders. For more information, visit: <http://www.crhn.org>.