

Op-Ed 2014

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UNITED WAY - CREATING LASTING SOLUTIONS, FOCUSING ON RESULTS

We've been busy over the past years researching key community conditions, increasing our reach by bringing on new community partners, and strengthening our ties with long-time partners. There has been a tremendous amount of change happening with United Way of Whatcom County all made possible by donors and supporters right here in our community.

Our biggest change was a shift 3 years ago to address specific goals in Education, Income, and Health – the 3 building blocks for a better life. This emphasis on changing community conditions is what makes United Way of Whatcom County's work unique. We don't just focus on one part of the issue, we tackle multiple aspects and use a variety of strategies and partners to reach specific community-wide goals. The results speak for themselves:

- Literacy for Whatcom Kindergarteners – up by 4% in 2013
- Homelessness in Whatcom County – decreased by 30% since 2008
- Whatcom County ranked 5 out of 39 – healthiest county in Washington

Education, Income, and Health: These issues affect us all, and it takes a variety of programs and strategies all moving in the right direction to affect change. Increasing early literacy increases the number of graduates later on, and increasing the graduation rate produces more individuals with the skills needed for the workplace. High school graduates earn more, contribute more to their local economies, are more engaged in their communities, and are more likely to raise kids who also graduate. More families with a roof overhead provide a foundation for a stable life and stable neighborhoods. When individuals have secure housing, they are able to focus on work, school and family. Healthy kids are more likely to succeed in school, and healthy teens make better choices. Our community flourishes when all residents have access to good foods, quality care, and tools to prevent and recover from abuse. The fact is: We are all interconnected and we all benefit from these positive effects.

The next change was to seek new partners to achieve our goals. Last year was the first time that we opened up our doors and our Community Impact Fund to a variety of new programs and partners with our new flexible and adaptable funding model. We began working with several new partners, including Home Port Learning Center, Whatcom Alliance for Health Advancement, Sustainable Connections, and Work Opportunities to name a few. We also strengthened our ties with long-time legacy partners such as the Whatcom Family YMCA, Boys & Girls Clubs of Whatcom County, Max Higbee Center, The Opportunity Council, Northwest Youth Services, and Bellingham

Childcare & Learning Center for example. With this mix of long-time and new partners, we have created a flexible recipe to ensure results. To tackle our goals, which involve increasing the graduation rate, ensuring housing, and providing a healthy/safe life for all, it will take more than one agency or just one strategy: It will take all of us working towards the same goals and looking at the issues from a variety of angles.

On the topic of working towards the same goals, our biggest change for this year will be coming up in the next months as our organization will combine office space with 2 other local foundations to create the Whatcom Center for Philanthropy. Thanks to the amazing support of Washington Federal Bank, and their significant in-kind donation, our office will be moving to the top floor of their building on Cornwall Avenue and joining space with the Whatcom Community Foundation and the Chuckanut Health Foundation. Our organizations will be able to work closer on shared community goals, work more efficiently in spaces better suited to our size and scope, and provide community space for local nonprofit meetings as well. The renovations to the space are happening right now, and the possibilities for collaboration will be endless.

We're changing our scope, our partners, and our location to better address the issues in our community because United Way is about more than short-term charity for a few; we're about lasting solutions that build opportunity for everyone. And the best part? You can be a part of it.

As we kick-off our 2014 Campaign, I invite you to join me. Your gift to United Way's Community Impact Fund will increase caps & gowns, ensure that families have a place to call home, and will ensure safe, healthy and active living. If your workplace offers a United Way Campaign, participate and make your contribution to our Community Impact Fund. If your work place does not offer a United Way Campaign, go online and give on our website: www.unitedwaywhatcom.org or over the phone 733-8670. If you would like to start a United Way Campaign at your work place, call us and we will work with you to implement a successful campaign. Want to learn more about our work in Education, Income, and Health? Visit us on Facebook, sign up for our e-news, check out our website, or give our office a call.

Our mission and vision for a stronger community for all is a big one, and no one person or organization can do it alone. But as you can see from the results above, when we choose to work together we can produce amazing changes in our community. Join us in inspiring hope and creating opportunities for a better tomorrow because great things happen when we live united.

Peter Theisen
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