

News Release 2011

October 21, 2011

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UNITED WAY OF WHATCOM COUNTY AWARDS GRANT TO SUPPORT FINANCIAL STABILITY

BELLINGHAM United Way of Whatcom County proudly awarded a grant of \$8,000 to the Whatcom Asset Building Coalition (WABC) to support income growth in Whatcom County.

WABC is a community collaboration supporting financial self-sufficiency through education and advocacy. Like United Way of Whatcom County, WABC promotes financial stability and independence in Whatcom County by helping individuals learn techniques to increase income and build savings.

“It is a community mobilization project,” said Peter Theisen, United Way of Whatcom County President. “It directly addresses the community’s needs and connects with United Way of Whatcom County’s efforts to help residents not only increase their income but also maintain their assets, which leads to financial independence.”

The Opportunity Council, a private, nonprofit community action agency, serves as the lead agency for the WABC. United Way of Whatcom County has been a committed member of the WABC since the coalition’s inception.

“When in crisis, people turn to alternative financial services like payday lending and check cashing,” said Anjali Englund, Outreach and Development Coordinator for the Opportunity Council.

Only 6 % of Whatcom Prosperity Project (a recent study that addressed issues and needs of residents living in poverty) respondents received credit or budget counseling. An unbanked, working household with an annual income of \$22,950 pays an average of \$1,042 in check cashing fees per year. To counter that, through its Bank On campaign, WABC encourages people to enroll in banks and credit unions in order to save assets, and WABC’s new On the Money seminars bridge asset building and employment by helping clients navigate their changing financial situations.

“We’re really grateful for this opportunity,” Englund said. “The support from United Way of Whatcom County helps bring together stakeholders like financial advisers and counselors and give people a pathway out of crisis not only in the short-term but more importantly, long-term.”

The WABC has already achieved many successes in their first three years of work and long-term success will involve expanding their efforts. The coalition is considering implementing innovative strategies such as incentivizing savings through prize-linked savings, providing clients a chance to win a cash prize every time they save a certain amount in a designated account. The group is also working on promoting gaining and sustaining assets through research and promotion of IDAs, microenterprise, small business development, home ownership and asset accumulation and protection.

The grant will also help WABC expand free tax preparation services at more locations and increase the number of working families that claim the anti-poverty Earned Income Tax Credit to receive more money on their tax return. Last tax season, over 2,300 returns were prepared at free tax preparation sites in Whatcom County. The client base for AARP free tax preparation sites increased by 25 %, and at the Bellingham Public Library, \$486,401 was claimed in Earned Income Tax Credit dollars alone.

The coalition's website, www.whatcomabc.org, offers an interactive map of free tax preparation sites, a comparison chart on basic checking account fees and a calendar of scheduled finance classes.

"We want clients and providers to know the feeling of financial security is attainable," Englund said. "The support from the United Way will help us achieve this."

United Way of Whatcom County has worked for over 50 years to increase financial resources for local health and human service needs, and to seek and invest in community-building opportunities to improve the health and welfare of Whatcom County residents.

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