

Group connects homeless to life-saving health care, housing

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—Kate Robertson—

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Kate Robertson (right) speaks with Whatcom Homeless Service Center Opportunity Council team member Theresa Meurs in Bellingham.

Kate Robertson is like a life preserver. When she makes contact with the homeless in Whatcom County she becomes a vital link to the health and housing resources they need to gain stability.

As the Homeless Outreach Team lead for the Whatcom Homeless Service Center Opportunity Council, Kate and her team strive to get to know every homeless person within the city limits, learning their names, bringing them coffee, checking in on them, and developing relationships. As they build trust, Kate and her team can help link people with the health and housing

resources they need to gain stability.

When Kate met Walter Starek at a homeless camp, she helped him connect with a clinic. When a medical provider discovered cancer in his throat, the clinic helped Walter, a six-year homeless resident of Bellingham, stay on top of his medical appointments and get transportation to and from the care he needed.

“Before our program was created in 2008, it was much more difficult for homeless individuals to get access to health care, housing and other services,” Kate said. “We’re getting organizations

that didn’t talk to each other before now to work together, so we can be creative with the resources we have.”

A non-profit group, the Council partners with community medical and mental health providers, housing organizations and other nonprofits to identify what prevents homeless people from reaching the services they need.

Once the Council and its partners identify obstacles homeless people face, they look for creative ways to remove them. “We figure out what’s the most direct path to service for these folks,” Kate says.

“One of the big misconceptions is that people experiencing homelessness chose this life. They themselves may even claim this in our first few interactions, but once we learn their stories and talk to them for months—or even years—we learn that they wish they could escape this lifestyle.”

The stress of being unemployed or homeless can contribute to serious physical and mental health conditions. When communities address these issues, it moves the vision for healthier families and communities beyond the doctor’s office.

Healthier Washington Linkages:

The state is committed to providing our most vulnerable populations with the supports they need to get and stay healthy. While not directly supported by Healthier Washington, the Whatcom story exemplifies how the Medicaid Transformation demonstration will address social determinants of health by investing Medicaid dollars in new supports for homeless individuals.



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