

# PRESS RELEASE

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## Northwest Community Activists Gather to Push for Wider Access to Health Care for the Uninsured

**December 11 meeting to highlight the expanding role of community organizations in keeping the regional health care "safety net" from shredding**

(Portland)– Communities across the United States are providing some 'light at the end of the tunnel' for the increasing number of uninsured who are facing problems accessing health care.

More and more frequently, the uninsured are working families who are just like their neighbors, except that they are cut off from the American healthcare system.

With over 43 million uninsured people in this country, according to recent Census Bureau data, the work of community health groups offers valuable lessons about innovative ways to narrow widening gaps in accessing health and medical services. (Another 31 million people are classified as "underinsured" and face many of the same problems.)

The Access Project has organized a **Northwest Regional Meeting, December 11<sup>th</sup> at the Sheraton Airport Hotel in Portland**, because of the work being done in the Northwest by community-based organizations, local initiatives and health-access advocates to respond to the needs of those "left out" of the health care picture. Community representatives from Oregon, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Utah and Washington are scheduled to attend this all-day forum, where they can share ideas and information about the work they are doing.

According to Ellen Pinney, Executive Director of the Oregon Health Action Campaign (OHAC), community organizations have been the backbone for advocacy and delivery of safety-net care for a long time. “We need to learn from each other constantly. The Access Project meeting is a tremendous forum for the seven states in this area to learn about some of the best programs and organizing efforts that are collaborating in the region to move national health reform forward,” says Pinney.

Catherine M. Dunham, the National Program Director for The Access Project, says: “A significant part of our mandate is to find and map innovation at the local level, where we believe healthcare reform is already occurring. We are finding in these regional meetings that important answers to the healthcare access problem are ‘home grown’.”

Last year, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a national healthcare philanthropy, recognized the value of connecting these local health access initiatives to one another and funded The Access Project at the Heller Graduate School at Brandeis University. The broad mission of The Access Project is to improve the health of our nation by working with local communities to develop and sustain efforts to promote universal healthcare access for people who are without health insurance.

Dunham says, that through this grassroots approach, communities are raising public awareness about the consequences of lack of health coverage for everyone. “Ultimately, the goal is to connect communities that are working independently on this issue and to build broader support and momentum among policymakers to expand access to health care and coverage for people without insurance.”

Bill Crimm, a health advocate for Utah Issues, a statewide organization active in health and poverty issues in Salt Lake City, states: “The importance of this meeting in Portland is in jump-starting the stalled work of expanding coverage to the large and growing number of uninsured.”

Carmen Bauer, the Executive Director of Centro LatinoAmericano, a member of Latino Medical Access Coalition (LMAC) in Portland, says her organization is dedicated to community prevention

programs through education, case management and outreach. "While we have services in the primary care area for the population that we serve, health access and affordability are still major barriers, even for people who are on the Oregon Health Plan," adds Bauer, who is presenting on "Outreach to Vulnerable and Ethnic Populations" at the meeting.

Steven Schroeder, M.D., President of The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, says healthcare access expansion for under-served communities is a major priority for the Foundation. "The Access Project is key to the Foundation's work in identifying new ways to improve access; help community leaders and organizations understand their local environment; and educate the broad, national policymaking community about access-to-care solutions."

The Portland meeting concludes this year's series of regional meetings sponsored by The Access Project. Previous meetings took place in Waltham, Massachusetts, El Paso, Texas, and Memphis, Tennessee.