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Statewide Project Targets Chronic Diseases

Seattle, Wash. — May 15, 2008 — Representatives of local clinics, tribal organizations, and health plans from across Washington met today at Sea-Tac International Airport for the first 2008 learning session of the Washington State Collaborative to Improve Health. The collaborative, or shared learning project, is part of a multi-year effort to improve health care for Washingtonians with chronic diseases such as asthma, diabetes, and heart disease.

The Washington State Collaborative is funded primarily by the state Department of Health and the Department of Social and Health Services, Health and Recovery Services Administration. Acumentra Health, the External Quality Review Organization for Washington's Medicaid program, is the contractor for the collaborative and partners with the University of Washington to conduct learning tracks that focus on child health.

The May 15 learning session brought together about 200 participants, including staff from nearly 40 clinics across the state, to learn about the use of evidence-based tools for managing chronic disease. The goal is to make it easier for the clinics to manage care for patients with chronic conditions and to engage patients in becoming active participants in their own treatment plans.

“With limited resources, both financial and in staffing, smaller medical clinics find it challenging to implement system changes that will improve care and health outcomes,” stated Susan Yates Miller, project manager for Acumentra Health. “The Washington State Collaborative provides tools and ongoing resources to help clinics prevent or manage chronic diseases and streamline their clinical processes.”

In the collaborative model, clinic teams work to improve the quality of care they deliver for a selected condition, such as asthma or diabetes. The teams attend learning sessions guided by experts in quality improvement. Team learning is supplemented by practice coaching, site visits, monthly teleconferences, and web-based information. The teams also receive training to use a free software program to track, manage, and coordinate patient care, as well as financial assistance to encourage participation.

More than 150 healthcare facilities across Washington have taken part in at least one state collaborative since 1999, and the targeted conditions have evolved over time. The current learning tracks focus on adult and child asthma, adult hypertension and diabetes, childhood obesity prevention and management, and establishing a medical home for children.

Dr. Jim Stout, MD, MPH, executive chair of the collaborative, pointed out that this meeting marks the first time that the collaborative has brought together the learning tracks aimed at improving care for both adults and children who live with chronic diseases. Dr. Stout is a professor of pediatrics at the University of Washington and a pediatrician at Odessa Brown Children's Clinic in Seattle.

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“Through this partnership, we’re attempting to bring the principles of chronic care management to bear on improving systems of care at the clinic level,” Dr. Stout said. “We’re not asking people to work harder, but to work smarter—to put systems in place that will enable them to manage chronic conditions proactively. We hope this collaborative will prove to be a durable resource for primary care practices, which are doing the lion’s share of work in managing chronic diseases.”

Dr. Stout noted that treating chronic illness accounts for 75 cents of every dollar spent on health care in the United States, yet relatively few medical practices proactively manage their populations of patients with chronic diseases to reduce the risk of complications and hospitalization.

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Acumentra Health is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the quality and effectiveness of health care. Established in 1984, Acumentra Health’s work spans the continuum of care, reaching all ages and economic levels, and all delivery settings. Acumentra Health contracts with Oregon and Washington to provide External Quality Review of managed care health services provided to Medicaid enrollees, as well as with Medicare to support effective, evidence-based health care for Medicare beneficiaries in Oregon along with overseeing the state’s Medicare Beneficiary Protection Program. In addition, Acumentra Health contracts with state agencies, public health organizations and coalitions, health plans, hospitals, physicians and others to conduct healthcare quality assurance and quality improvement projects. As a leader in healthcare quality, Acumentra Health provides expertise in areas such as performance measurement and improvement, surveys, utilization management, healthcare data analysis, chronic disease management, peer review, and electronic health records. For more information, visit www.acumentra.org.