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Washington State Medicaid to Focus on Those with Pressing Health & Housing Needs

OLYMPIA, WA -- Vulnerable residents in Washington State received welcomed news yesterday when the federal government provided final approval for the use of Medicaid dollars to create a supportive housing services benefit [as part of an 1115 Waiver](#), effectively expanding opportunities to help people with the most complex health care and housing needs to access and remain in housing.

“In August of 2014, [CSH](#), in partnership with the [Washington Low Income Housing Alliance](#), issued a [call to action](#) encouraging states to apply to the national Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to include supportive housing services in their state Medicaid programs,” said Deborah De Santis, President and CEO of CSH. “CMS last year publicly indicated that pre-tenancy and tenancy-sustaining services can and [should be part of state Medicaid programs](#). Approving Washington State’s request yesterday backs up these words with concrete action that will make a difference in the lives of thousands of Washingtonians and pave the way for all states to create supportive housing services benefits.”

Supportive housing offers the most vulnerable people, including those experiencing homelessness, access to affordable rental units and services to keep them housed and healthy. A lack of reliable financing for the services in supportive housing has been identified as one of the biggest barriers to ending chronic homelessness in Washington State and throughout the country.

“This benefit will help bring the services to scale that are necessary for people experiencing chronic homelessness to access housing stability and better health,” said Kate Baber, Policy and Advocacy Specialist, Washington Low Income Housing Alliance.

By authorizing what is known as Washington State’s five-year demonstration waiver, CMS is allowing the State to establish a benefit to provide the core services in supportive housing so that it will be far less likely residents are turned away from key services because providers lack resources.

“It gives service providers an essential tool to expand or enhance what they are doing to create supportive housing,” said Debbie Thiele, Director of CSH National Consulting Team, who is based in Washington State. “Having a place to live is paramount for establishing stability for anyone, and tenancy-support services ensure that the most vulnerable people succeed in housing. Finally having the revenue to pay for these services will provide a platform from which people with the greatest needs can rebuild their lives.”

Thiele specifically called out the efforts of multiple partners in Washington State, specifically the Washington Low Income Housing Alliance, for generating the advocacy needed to produce state-wide support for the benefit and the State of Washington, for delivering the newly-approved waiver.

“The Alliance recognizes the integral role these services play in preventing people from re-entering homelessness, and their work on the ground was critical to the formation of the request and in convincing Washington State to submit the waiver application to CMS,” she said.

In addition to Washington, CSH is embracing efforts in other states that have similar waivers pending before the federal government or are actively working toward equivalent initiatives. These include: New Jersey, Florida, North Dakota, Illinois, and Hawaii.

“Because supportive housing is proven to work, states are eager to pursue waiver requests that include tenancy support benefits,” Thiele concluded. “The final approval of Washington State’s Waiver sets a welcomed precedent that bodes well for supportive housing and the thousands of tenants who rely on Medicaid to lead healthier lives.”

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