

## The Uninsured in Washington State A Public Opinion Poll

This document provides the major findings of a representative telephone study conducted in early January 2005 among 750 likely voters in Washington State. The “People Without Health Insurance in Washington State” poll was conducted for members of the Working for Health Coalition, Inc. by Widmeyer Research and Polling of Washington, DC. The margin of error for the study is +/- 3.5%.

The major **conclusions** of the study are:

1. Voters say that healthcare is now the single most important issue or problem facing Washington State today. The uninsured problem is believed to have a major impact in increasing overall healthcare costs.
2. Voters are extremely concerned about people without health insurance and say the current healthcare system is not addressing this problem. Concern about the uninsured has grown since last year and large majorities of voters support the goal of providing health insurance to all residents.
3. Voters overwhelmingly support a viable “healthcare safety-net” that provides care to people without health insurance. Support for the healthcare safety-net has increased from last year.
4. Large majorities of voters support actions that the state legislature could take to provide health insurance for working families and poorer residents who have none. Voters express concern that the “will of the people” is being thwarted by the state legislature on the issue of expanding health insurance for the uninsured.
5. Voters believe that employers have a responsibility to provide health insurance to their employees and believe, when companies don’t, that it increases costs for everyone. Voters want the state to require large employers to provide health insurance.
6. Voters support mental health parity in health insurance and want the legislature to require it. They believe cutting expenditures for mental healthcare increases healthcare costs.
7. Voters recognize that increased taxes are necessary to offset healthcare cuts that have been four years running. There is strong support for new taxes on cigarettes and alcohol and for closing certain tax loopholes, but minimal support for small increases in monthly health insurance premiums.
8. Although voters say they worry most about children that do not have health insurance, they express nearly as much concern for uninsured seniors, the working poor and low-income families. The bottom line is that voters are concerned about all people without health insurance.



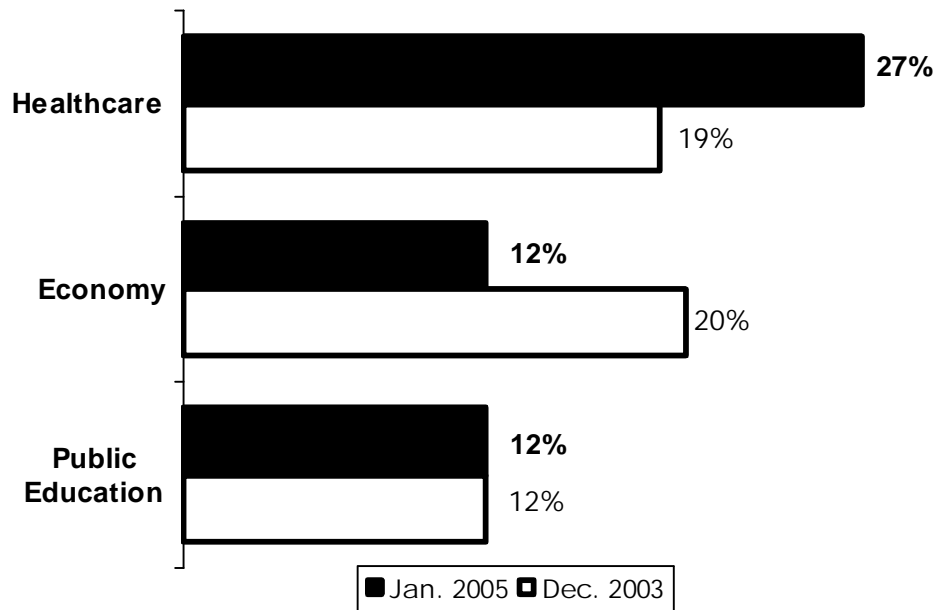
## MAJOR FINDINGS

- 1. Voters say that healthcare is now the single most important issue or problem facing Washington State today. The uninsured problem is believed to have a major impact in increasing overall healthcare costs.**

Voters identify healthcare as the most important problem or issue facing Washington State. The number of voters who say that healthcare is the biggest problem increased significantly from last year.

- In January 2005, more than 1 in 4 voters (27%) identify health care as the most important problem, compared to 12% for the economy and 12% for public education.
- In December 2003, health care was second (19% of voters), behind the economy (20%). Twelve percent of voters identified public education as the biggest problem.

**What do you think is the single most important problem or issue facing Washington State today?**





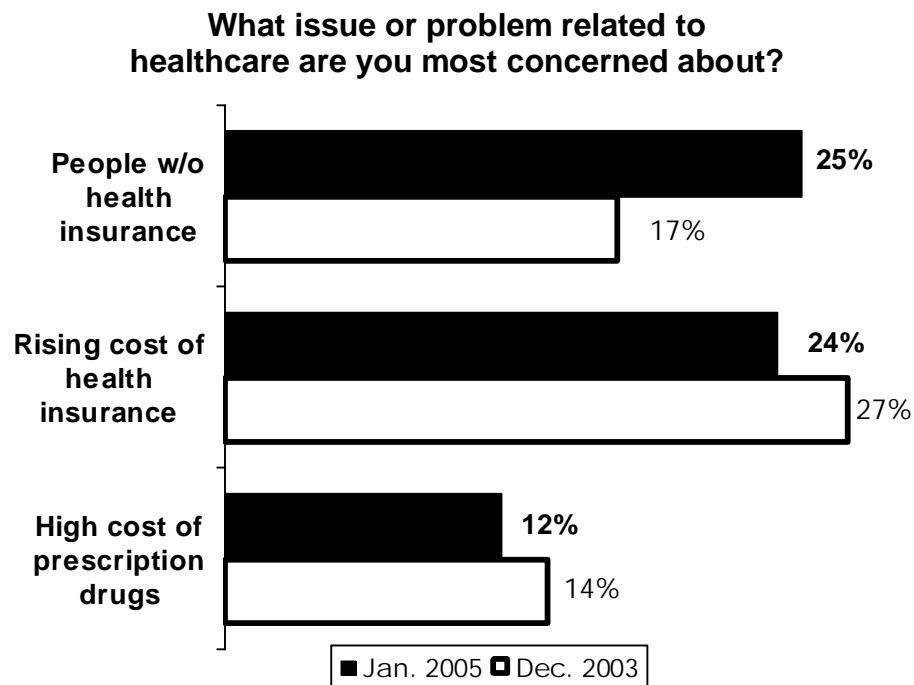
Most voters believe that having people without health insurance increases costs for everyone.

- Four in five voters (80%) think the fact that people lack health insurance increases overall healthcare costs.
- Seven in ten voters (70%) think the fact that people lack health insurance increases their families' monthly payment of premium.
- Nearly 9 in 10 voters (89%) say it is more cost effective to pay for health insurance now for the uninsured than to pay later after they develop health problems that are expensive to treat.

**2. Voters are extremely concerned about people without health insurance and say the current healthcare system is not addressing this problem. Concern about the uninsured has grown since last year and large majorities of voters support the goal of providing health insurance to all residents.**

People without health insurance is the health care issue that most concerns voters, followed by the rising cost of health insurance. Last year, many more voters said that the rising cost of health insurance was the issue they were most concerned about.

- In January 2005, 1 in 4 voters (25%) say that people without health insurance is the issue or problem related to healthcare that they are most concerned about. A similar percentage (24%) say rising cost of health insurance.
- In December 2003, many cited rising cost of health insurance (27%) as their major concern, compared to people without health insurance (17%).





Voters are clearly very concerned about the uninsured problem and identify it as an extremely serious healthcare problem that needs to be addressed.

- More than 9 in 10 voters (92%) say they are concerned – 68% very – about the problem of people without health insurance.
- More than 3 in 4 voters say that the problem of people without health insurance is getting worse (77%), not better (6%).

Voters believe the current healthcare system does not do a good job of providing health insurance to most people and that it is important for elected officials *at the state level* to provide basic health insurance for residents who can't afford it.

- Only 18% of voters say the current healthcare system does either a “great” (3%) or “good” (15%) job of providing basic health insurance for residents who can't pay for it. About half of voters (48%) say the current healthcare system is doing a “fair” job and more than 1 in 4 (27%) say it is doing a “poor” job.”
- Nearly 9 in 10 voters (86%) say it is important – 65% very important – for the state of Washington to provide affordable basic health insurance for residents who cannot afford it.
- More than 4 in 5 voters (82%) agree – 58% strongly – that the goal of ensuring that every resident has health insurance should be a top priority for state officials. In fact, nearly 9 in 10 voters (88%) say that providing health insurance to all people should be an important healthcare goal.

### **3. Voters overwhelmingly support a viable “healthcare safety net” that provides care to people without health insurance. Support for the healthcare safety net has increased from last year.**

Nearly all voters say the healthcare safety net<sup>1</sup> is an absolutely critical component of the healthcare delivery system for the uninsured.

- Nearly all voters (94%) say it is important to have a safety net that offers affordable healthcare to all people.

Poll results show that support for protecting the healthcare safety net has increased since last year.

- The percentage of voters who say it is VERY important to have a safety net that offers affordable healthcare to all people increased to 81% from 74% last year.

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<sup>1</sup> Definition of the healthcare safety-net: Washington's safety net is comprised of community health clinics and public hospitals. Community health clinics offer primary care to patients regardless of ability to pay. Hospital emergency rooms are required to provide care to people regardless of ability to pay.



- The percentage of voters who say it is VERY appropriate to spend tax dollars to protect the healthcare safety net increased to 53% from 48% last year.
  - Overall, 86% of voters say it is either very or somewhat appropriate.
- The percentage of voters who say protecting the healthcare safety net should be a priority for elected state officials increased to 82% from 76% last year.

Voter attitudes about the safety net help explain why voters support community health clinics and want local hospitals to remain viable as quality-care giving institutions.

- Nearly 9 in 10 voters (87%) agree – 63% strongly – with the statement that *community health clinics that provide healthcare to anyone regardless of their ability to pay should be supported by the state.*
  - Last year only 78% of voters agreed – 41% strongly – with this statement
- More than 4 in 5 (85%) agree – 61% strongly – with the statement *it is imperative that the state financially support local hospitals that provide free healthcare to the uninsured at hospital emergency rooms.*



**4. Large majorities of voters support actions that the state legislature could take to provide health insurance for working families and poorer residents who have none. Voters express concern that the “will of the people” is being thwarted by the state legislature on the issue of expanding health insurance for the uninsured.**

As the table below illustrates, more than 3 in 5 voters support specific pieces of legislation that expand health insurance coverage or care for working families and poorer residents. These include expanding health insurance coverage to include all children, increasing state funding for community clinics, requiring large employers to provide health insurance or pay a tax, and eliminating Medicaid administrative barriers and premiums.

<b>Possible Legislation to Increase Health Insurance Coverage</b>	<b>SUPPORT NET (%)</b>	<b>Strongly Support (%)</b>	<b>Somewhat Support (%)</b>	<b>Somewhat Oppose (%)</b>	<b>Strongly Oppose (%)</b>
Having the legislature gradually expand health coverage for children so that by 2010, all children would be covered by some form of health insurance, either through their parents' employer, or through the state.	<b>85</b>	61	24	6	7
Having the legislature increase state funding to community health clinics that must treat people regardless of their ability to pay.	<b>81</b>	54	27	8	6
Having the legislature require larger employers to provide affordable basic healthcare insurance to employees or pay a health insurance tax that would be used to cover uninsured workers.	<b>76</b>	53	23	9	12
Having the legislature eliminate administrative barriers intended to reduce Medicaid fraud that instead have prevented tens of thousands of eligible children from receiving health insurance.	<b>70</b>	47	23	7	7
Having the legislature eliminate Medicaid premiums for families of children living near the poverty line.	<b>60</b>	33	27	16	17



In addition to supporting a specific legislative agenda that provides health insurance for the uninsured, voters support other measures that would reduce the costs associated with healthcare.

- Nearly 9 in 10 voters (89%) would support the legislature working with the drug industry to make it more efficient for low-income people to get free access to donated prescription drugs.
- Nearly 9 in 10 voters (87%) support the legislature creating a prescription drug pool purchasing program that would help reduce the cost of drugs for groups and individuals by letting them purchase at the group rate.

Voters are very upset that the legislature repealed an initiative that Washington State voters overwhelmingly passed in 2003 that raised \$150 million in tobacco taxes each year to expand the Basic Health Plan. And they are outraged that the legislature then cut the Basic Health Plan by 30,000 slots.

- Nearly 9 in 10 voters (88%) say they are upset – 64% very upset – that politicians ignored the voters on this issue.

**5. Voters believe that employers have a responsibility to provide health insurance to their employees and believe, when companies don't, that it increases costs for everyone. Voters want the state to require larger employers to provide health insurance.**

The vast majority of voters believe it is important that employers provide at least basic health insurance to their employees and believe that the state should require it of larger employers.

- Nearly all voters (95%) say that it is important – 75% very important – for larger employers to provide affordable, basic health insurance for their employees.
- More than 7 in 10 voters (72%) say that larger employers are avoiding their responsibility by not providing health insurance.
- More than 2 in 3 voters (68%) think that the state should require these larger employers to provide health insurance to their employees.

Voter sentiment about employer responsibility is strong.

- Nearly 9 in 10 voters (88%) agree – 65% strongly – with the statement *employees deserve to receive affordable health insurance from their employers.*
- Nearly 4 in 5 voters (83%) agree – 67% strongly – with the statement *large corporations should be held accountable to minimum public standards, like providing health insurance to their employees.*



- More than 7 in 10 voters (71%) agree – 35% strongly – with the statement *health insurance is an employer responsibility.*
- Nearly 7 in 10 voters (69%) agree – 48% strongly – with the statement *large corporations have an obligation to pay their fair share towards the cost of providing healthcare to the uninsured.*

Voters also recognize that there is a connection between employers' not providing health insurance and the costs we all have to pay for coverage.

- More than 6 in 10 voters (63%) say that the fact that some larger employers do not offer health insurance to their employees is a major factor in the increased costs consumers and taxpayers have to pay for health insurance.

## **6. Voters support mental health parity in health insurance and want the legislature to require it. They believe cutting expenditures for mental healthcare increases healthcare costs.**

Voters strong support mental health parity.

- More than 4 in 5 voters (86%) agree – 63% strongly – with the statement *state residents should get the same level of health insurance or benefits for mental illness that they get for physical health problems.*
- Nearly 8 in 10 voters (79%) say they would support the legislature requiring the same level of health insurance for mental illness that residents get for physical health problems even if insurance premiums were increased slightly (less than 1%).

Voters are concerned about the fact that the federal government recently reduced its payment to the state for mental health services and want the legislature to make up the difference.

- Nearly 7 in 10 voters (69%) support the legislature coming up with \$81 million in state funding to make up for the lost federal money.

Voters believe that cutting expenditures for mental healthcare actually increases overall healthcare costs. More than 7 in 10 voters cite three major reasons for this:

- Nearly 4 in 5 voters (79%) are convinced that if the state doesn't fund mental healthcare services now, more mentally ill patients will end up in jail or develop physical problems, resulting in higher costs.
- Three in four voters (76%) are convinced that when people suffering from mental illnesses are left untreated, they are more likely to need healthcare to treat physical problems. This strains the system and increases costs.



- More than 7 in 10 voters (72%) are convinced that hospitals that are required to serve the low-income mentally ill free of charge should be reimbursed by the state. Otherwise, the costs are passed on to consumers.

**7. Voters recognize that increased taxes are necessary to offset healthcare cuts that have been four years running. There is strong support for new taxes on cigarettes and alcohol and for closing certain tax loopholes but minimal support for small increases in monthly health insurance premiums.**

Voters recognize that repeated cuts in the healthcare budget over the past few years now necessitate raising revenues through new taxes.

- Nearly 2 in 3 voters (66%) – 43% strongly – agree with the statement: *After four straight years of cutting the healthcare budget, it is now time to face the fact that we need to raise revenues through some kind of tax to avoid further cuts.*

A majority of voters STRONGLY support taxes on cigarettes, alcohol and soda to raise revenues to provide health insurance for low-income and working families who have none. There is also strong support for eliminating tax loopholes enjoyed by real estate agents.

Taxes	Strongly Support (%)	Support (%)
A fifty cents tax on cigarettes.	69	82
Eliminating a tax loophole that allows real estate agents to avoid paying taxes on their commissions.	60	73
A higher tax on alcohol.	56	77
A five cents tax on cans or bottles of beer.	53	75
A five cents tax on cans or bottles of soda.	51	71

There is minimal willingness among voters to pay a small increase in their monthly health insurance premium to provide health insurance to the uninsured.

- Only 57% of voters say they would be willing to pay a small increase. Of those, 63% are only willing to pay \$10 or less per month. Nearly 4 in 10 (39%) say they are only willing to pay \$5 or less per month.



**8. Although voters say they worry most about children that do not have health insurance, they express nearly as much concern for uninsured seniors, the working poor and low-income families. The bottom line is that voters are concerned about all people without health insurance.**

When Washington State voters were asked which uninsured groups of people they were most concerned about, children, senior citizens, the working poor, working families, low-income families and low-income people were at the top of the list.

- As the table below illustrates, many voters also cited working families and low-income people separately. These poll results clearly indicate that Washington voters are concerned about many groups of people who lack health insurance.

<b>Which groups of uninsured people are you most concerned about?</b>	<b>Voters (%)</b>
Children	36
Senior citizens	24
Working poor	22
Working families	19
Low-income families	14
Low-income people	14
Unemployed	13