

## **Student Health Options, DBA The Health Center, a 501c3 in Walla Walla, Washington**

**Mission:** Advancing the success of students by addressing their physical, emotional and social needs.

**Vision:** Access to high quality, comprehensive healthcare will not be a barrier to any student's success.

### **About our organization:**

The Health Center advances the success of students by addressing their physical, mental and social needs with school based, no-charge medical care, mental health counseling, health education, and referrals to community healthcare providers and social services. These services result in increased academic success by keeping students healthy and connected to school and on course to graduate.

We are an independent 501(c)(3) organization that delivers trauma informed strategies and an integrated care model in school based health clinics in the Walla Walla area. We receive no funding from the public schools we serve.

The Health Center fills a vital and previously neglected gap in the mental and physical health care of the Walla Walla areas most traumatized and least resourced children.

1. The Health Center is very **engaged** in our community, and we couldn't do the work we do without our community partners. Our primary relationship is with the Walla Walla Public School District (WWPS) and the Walla Walla County Department of Community Health (WWCDCH). From 2014-2017, WWCDCH led a School Health Advisory Committee (SHAC) that is working to improve the comprehensive health of students and staff in the Walla Walla Public School District. SHAC's main objective was to complete the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention School Health Index, which is a questionnaire with 8 different modules that assess the strengths and weaknesses of each area of health. SHAC members consisted of WWCDCH staff, WWPS staff, The Health Center staff, parents, and community members. After completing the modules, a final report is generated that identifies opportunities for improvement, along with suggested

solutions. One module of the school health index is mental health. As The Health Center completed the mental health module with their community partners, it was an opportunity to learn more detail about the services provided by the community, and how The Health Center could help address some of the gaps in service. This assessment allowed The Health Center and WWPS to deepen their commitment to serving the students of Walla Walla by expanding The Health Center services to four schools. Due to the number of different perspectives that we a part of the SHAC committee, The Health Center was able to **maintain, build** and **strengthen** relationships with several businesses, organizations, and community members because of this process. The Health Center still regularly attends SHAC meetings.

2. As a built-in process of completing the School Health Index as a part of the School Health Advisory (mentioned above), the SHAC committee **co-created** several solutions to address the gaps in mental health services. The suggested solutions included: increase trauma informed practices for students and staff, increase mental health services, increase media campaigns to address mental health concerns and systems change. Several years later, we are seeing these suggestions fully implemented. Several schools in the district have completed trauma-informed practice training, and The Health Center has helped to reinforce those practices with students and staff. Mental health services have increased in schools as The Health Center was able to expand services to four schools. The Health Center has supported several school/community events such as Out of the Darkness Suicide Prevention Awareness and The Health Center staff attending Topics of Concern meetings at the schools. Lastly, systems change has been truly a **co-creation** of community resources. The Health Center has been lucky to be a partner in The Hub. The Hub is a single point of service for teens. At The Hub, The Health Center partnered with Blue Mountain Action Council, Children's Home Society, and Catholic Charities. The Hub offers health care services at The Health Center, an early HeadStart for children of teens, and a shelter for homeless teens. All three organizations work in partnership with each other to provide services to students, so we

can do our best as a collaborative community to keep them healthy, in school, and see them graduate.

3. The Health Center addresses **systematic inequities** by offering no cost services. If a student walks through our doors, it doesn't matter if they have insurance or not, we see them anyway. We never collect money from our clients. At The Health Center, we understand that financial barriers can prevent students from seeking much needed care, whether physical or mental health services. In addition, our mental health counselors host small groups as a part of student engagement. In these small groups, tough subjects are discussed, such as racism, power differentials, healthy relationships, and suicide. We strive to give our students a safe space and promote **equity** both by demonstration and principle.
4. The Health Center was first formed in response to the critical behavioral and physical health needs of students at Lincoln High School, a disadvantaged and struggling population with many students suffering from trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). A child's experience of trauma impacts every area of their health and well-being— physical, mental, behavioral, and social. Within this context, our clinic utilizes a trauma-informed approach to patient care that recognizes the impact of our patients' trauma histories and incorporates this into the holistic care we provide. Crucial to our **success** with students is building trust through our non-judgmental, informal approach. The kids know when they walk in our door that they will be treated with total kindness and respect, no matter what state they are presenting to us in. They know that they will be cared for, that they will be loved. Informal conversation, often over a treat from our "snack closet", helps to build trust and a level of comfort that is difficult to develop in a conventional clinic setting. All of The Health Center staff has been trained in trauma informed practices, and encourage, support, and attend similar trainings with our primary partner, Walla Walla Public Schools. The Health Center board members understand and value this approach, and many board members have even taken the trainings themselves. The Health Center operates on a relationship-based model and

this philosophy extends into all of our interactions between staff, students, board members, and community partners.

5. One of our most **significant challenges** is recruiting medical providers (Medical doctors and Nurse Practitioners). Since we are a non-profit, we cannot compete with the salaries of privately owned health care institutions. We are fortunate to have some medical providers volunteer their time, but the time they have available is limited since most have a full-time job elsewhere. We continue to seek innovative, creative, and sustainable solutions to this barrier, such as enrolling in educational loan repayment programs.
6. The Health Center is fortunate to receive feedback from students regularly through daily interactions, conversation, and survey data. We hear feedback such as “When I go [to The Health Center] I feel cared for and am very happy with the results.” and “I love The Health Center; they are very nice and accepting of everyone.” We have seen graduation rates increase, fewer school absences, fewer emergency room visits, fewer discipline issues, and increased coordinated care for families. At The Health Center, we believe we are creating a more **hopeful** future for the students and the Walla Walla community because of the services we provide.