

## WSHA STANDARD COMMUNICATION PLAN

### Minimum Recommendations for Communicating About Financial Assistance/Charity Care

*This document provides minimum standards for when and how hospitals should communicate with patients and the community about the availability of financial assistance/charity care. These recommendations include requirements of Washington State's charity care law (RCW 70.170 and WAC 246-453) applicable to all Washington hospitals and IRS 501(r) regulations on financial assistance applicable to charitable tax-exempt 501(c)(3) hospitals (Treasury Regulation §§ 1.501(r)-1 to 1.501(r)-7.) While we recognize not all hospitals are required by law to meet IRS 501(r) rules, we believe all hospitals in Washington should meet these requirements as best practice.*

- **Hospitals should use the terms financial assistance and charity care.**
  - “Charity care” is the term used in state law. This term may be well known, but patient may be put off or confused by this term.
  - “Financial assistance” is the term focus groups prefer. It encompasses both “charity care” and the broader context of hospital financial assistance (which can include assistance with Medicaid applications and more).
- **Hospitals should provide information on the hospital website**
  - Information should be available on the hospital website and it should be readily accessible and not require patients to log on to any system to access.
  - Information should include the hospital's financial assistance policy, a plain language summary of the financial assistance policy, the hospital's financial assistance application, information on the current federal poverty levels by family size, and contact information for a specific hospital department for those needing assistance.
- **Hospitals should provide information widely throughout the facility**
  - Patients should be offered a written plain language summary of the hospital's financial assistance policy either as part of the intake process or upon discharge and when the hospital requests information on availability of any third party coverage. WSHA will develop a model plain language summary and make it available on our website.
  - Patients should be able to receive a paper copies of the hospital's financial assistance policy, plain language summary of the financial assistance policy, financial assistance application form, and information on the current federal poverty levels by family size upon request. This includes having paper copies available in the hospital and via mail. Provide these documents free of charge.
  - Staff should know how to answer questions from patients. Hospitals should train key staff (reception and customer service staff among others) to be able to refer patients who are seeking financial assistance information as well as community members expressing concern about hardship or difficulty paying for health care.
- **Hospitals should publicly post information.**
  - There should be conspicuous (size and location) public displays that attract visitors' attention.
  - Signs need to be displayed in public locations, including, at a minimum, the emergency room (if any) and admissions areas.
  - WSHA has model signs, available on WSHA website.

- **Hospitals should include information on billings statements**
  - Billing statements should include conspicuous written notice about the availability of financial assistance under the hospital's financial assistance policy and include the telephone number of the hospital facility office or department that can provide information about financial assistance and the application process, and the direct Web site address (or URL) where copies of the financial assistance policy, application form, and plain language summary of the financial assistance policy may be obtained.
  - WSHA has recommended language: "If you need help paying your bill, whether or not you have insurance, please contact our financial assistance office at \_\_\_\_\_."
- **Hospitals should provide information on assistance to patients in post discharge communications**
  - Hospitals should provide a plain language summary of the hospital's financial assistance policy in at least one post-discharge communication. At a minimum, hospitals should send this to a subset of patients against whom the hospital facility actually intends to engage in "extraordinary collection actions" (as defined in 501(r) regulations).
- **Hospitals should provide information to community members**
  - Hospitals should identify community locations and groups to assist in providing community members with information about the availability of financial assistance. Examples include libraries, community centers, homeless shelters, wellness fairs, local chambers and volunteer organizations, retirement facilities, and schools.
- **Hospitals should notify patients that they may receive additional third party billings**
  - The information should notify patients that they may receive bills from entities other than the hospital.
  - Current WSHA recommended language: "Many doctors, ambulance companies, and labs are separate businesses with their own billing and account procedures. Below is a list of the groups that regularly provide care for patients at \_\_\_\_\_. If you receive a bill from them and have questions about it, please contact them."
  - Recommend use of WSHA model brochure inserts, available on WSHA website.
- **Hospitals should notify patients they may request an estimate of hospital charges.**
  - Post information in patient registration areas to inform patients that they may request an estimation of charges.
  - Text required under state law: "Information about the estimated charges of your hospital services is available upon request. Please do not hesitate to ask for information."
- **Hospitals should provide information in multiple languages**
  - 501(c)(3) hospitals are required to translate the hospital's financial assistance policy, application form, and plain language summary of the financial assistance policy into languages spoken by each low English proficiency language group that constitutes the lesser of 1,000 individuals or five percent of the community served by the hospital facility or the population likely to be affected or encountered by the hospital facility.
  - Washington state hospitals are required under state law to provide information on financial assistance in a language spoken by more than ten percent of the population in the hospital's service area, and interpreted for other non-English speaking or limited-English speaking or other patients who cannot read or understand the writing and explanation.