

Aligning Forces for Quality in Willamette Valley, Ore. A Community Snapshot

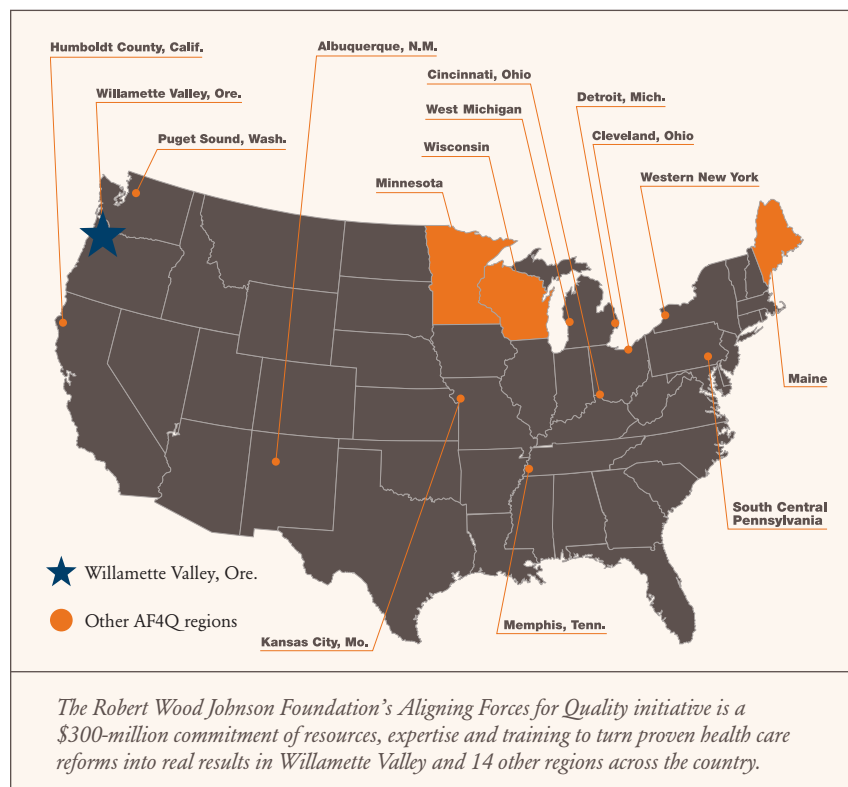
Oregon's Greater Willamette Valley, which includes the city of Portland, is the most densely populated and agriculturally productive region of the Beaver State. "Smart growth" policies have helped keep its wineries and farms from being lost to suburban sprawl and contributed to the vitality of Portland, Salem and its other main cities. The home of several active-wear companies, more than 1,000 high-tech firms and one of the West Coast's busiest seaports, Portland is often described as one of America's most livable places.

But even robust regions like the Willamette Valley face tough social problems, including serious health care challenges. According to the Dartmouth Atlas of Health Care, more than one in three women there insured by Medicare do not get mammograms to detect breast cancer. Nearly one in 10 patients with diabetes do not get crucial blood tests. Statewide, elderly Oregonians with back pain are one-and-a-half times more likely to have surgery than seniors in the rest of the country—a strong indication that many of those procedures are unnecessary.

The Willamette Valley is hardly alone. These are examples of a broader crisis in the quality of care that the U.S. medical system delivers. The statistics in the Willamette Valley are repeated in community after community, endangering the health of millions. And it is not just the failure to deliver care that contributes to the quality problem. Delivering care that harms people—or delivering care that people do not need—is adding billions of dollars to the national health care bill and is one reason why so many Americans cannot afford health insurance.

While the health care crisis is national, care is delivered locally. That is why the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) is investing \$300 million in promising efforts to improve local health systems in the

Willamette Valley and 14 other regions across the nation. Called *Aligning Forces for Quality* (AF4Q), the initiative brings an unprecedented commitment of resources, expertise and training to turn proven health care reforms into real results at the community level. The AF4Q initiative focuses on the full continuum of health care delivery—the care provided in doctors' offices, clinics and hospitals, and the support provided in the community. It also emphasizes reducing racial and ethnic disparities in care and strengthening nursing's role in improving quality.



It advances three interrelated reforms that experts believe are essential to improving health care quality:

- **Performance measurement and public reporting:** using common standards to measure the quality of patient care and publicly disclosing that performance information.
- **Consumer engagement:** educating patients about their local health care systems to encourage them to demand higher-quality care and help them take a more active role in their own health.
- **Quality improvement:** implementing techniques and protocols that let doctors and hospitals raise the quality of care they deliver to patients.

This snapshot describes how the AF4Q initiative is being implemented in the Willamette Valley and the progress being made on these three main fronts.

How AF4Q is Being Implemented in the Willamette Valley

In 2007, RWJF selected the nonprofit Oregon Health Care Quality Corporation to implement the AF4Q effort in the Willamette Valley. Established in 2001, it helps health care providers, payers, consumers and policy-makers use information to drive improvements in health care's quality and cost.

The Quality Corporation was chosen through a competition to find groups best positioned to make fundamental, cutting-edge changes to their region's health care system. In addition to expertise, technical assistance and training from national experts, RWJF is providing the Quality Corporation with more than \$1 million over three years and access to additional grants for specific projects.

The Quality Corporation has also drawn the federal government's notice as a promising national model. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recently added it to its national network of 25 Chartered Value Exchanges. Membership gives the Quality Corporation access to technical assistance that will enrich its AF4Q work, plus opportunities to learn from other collaboratives pursuing data-driven quality improvement.

Willamette Valley Overview

AF4Q service region:

- 9 counties: Benton, Clackamas, Lane, Linn, Marion, Multnomah, Polk, Washington and Yamhill

Health system:

- General hospitals:¹ 27
- General hospital beds:¹ 4,677
- Primary care providers (M.D.s):² 2,091
- Primary care physicians (D.O.s):³ 324

Population:⁴ 2,622,321

- White: 88.7%
- African American: 2.5%
- Asian: 4.8%
- Two or more races: 2.6%
- American Indian or Pacific Islander: 1.4%
- Hispanic: 11.4% (includes all races)
- Under age 18: 23.5%
- Ages 18–64: 65.1%
- Ages 65 and older: 11.4%

Per capita income:⁵ \$26,333

Uninsured (ages 18–64):⁶ \$26,333

The Quality Corporation's AF4Q program, Partner for Quality Care, has three main goals: (1) measuring and publicly reporting on the quality of health care; (2) helping patients and consumers recognize and contribute to high-quality care; and (3) helping providers improve the quality of their care through technical assistance. The Quality Corporation has created teams to guide its AF4Q work in the areas of measurement and reporting, consumer engagement and quality improvement.

Progress on Performance Measurement and Public Reporting

In most places in the United States, information about health care quality is siloed in a number of sources. The 15 AF4Q teams are forging relationships and breaking down barriers between health care providers, payers and employers to create common systems for collecting and reporting health care performance data.

In addition to collecting and reporting performance data, all AF4Q teams are seeking ways to measure and analyze their community's overall health. These efforts can help them identify public health interventions in tandem with improvements in care in clinical settings.

Oregon has taken noteworthy strides toward the collection and public reporting of health care performance indicators. Both the Oregon Office of Health Policy and Research and the Oregon Association of Hospitals and Health Systems publicly report data on hospitals' average charges and costs for select conditions and procedures, and on the quality of care provided in hospitals based on nationally recognized indicators.

In August 2008, the Quality Corporation and the state hospital association co-sponsored an online seminar on common standards and best practices for collecting race, ethnicity and primary-language information from patients. In February 2009, it convened a follow-up meeting attended by representatives from more than 20 organizations.

The Quality Corporation has also convened experts to select primary care performance measures that will be used to guide and align health care quality improvement efforts across Oregon. It is also leading an effort to coordinate claims data from the state's major health plans to help physicians improve the prevention and treatment of asthma, diabetes, heart disease and depression.

As part of its AF4Q work, the Quality Corporation collects 11 nationally recognized quality measures for disease prevention and chronic disease management from eight local health plans. It aims to provide clinics and physicians with user-friendly data they can act on immediately to improve care. These tools are currently being tested and will be sent to all clinics with four or more providers by May 2009. It will then provide performance reports to the public at large on its forthcoming Partner for Quality Care Web site by late 2009. The consumer-oriented site, scheduled to be launched in early 2009, will include resources and tools to help patients understand the attributes of and obtain high-quality care. The Quality Corporation is also working with clinics and physicians to explore ways to use data from electronic medical records to enrich performance indicators. The Quality Corporation also plans to include five measures of hospital quality on the Partner for Quality Care Web site by the end of 2009 and is exploring ways to coordinate and standardize the collection and reporting of data on patient experiences of care.

Progress on Consumer Engagement

The Quality Corporation's consumer engagement activities are designed to help local residents understand that not all care is of high quality and to become active partners in managing their care.

For example, it recently co-sponsored a workshop on health care quality and patient safety for older citizens with AARP and the Oregon Patient Safety Commission. The event featured skits performed by patients and providers and a mock "Who Wants to be a Quality Millionaire" game show. The Quality Corporation also used the session for 50 AARP members to field-test print materials it has developed on topics such as the attributes of high-quality care, finding trustworthy sources of health information on the Web, having a good doctor's visit, "care that works," and obtaining the right amount of care. Groups that work with the Quality Corporation can download these educational materials from the corporation's Web site for distribution to their own constituencies.

The Quality Corporation will soon begin to provide its brochures and other consumer handouts to at least five health plans with a combined 150,000 members. It also will begin teaching community leaders to educate others about the attributes of high-quality care and will offer general and condition-specific health self-management tools on the Partner for Quality Care Web site.

Progress on Quality Improvement

Quality improvement efforts in health care increasingly focus on lifting the performance of entire systems, not just that of individuals. All 15 AF4Q grantees have been asked to consider ways to create a permanent quality improvement resource in their community, for example by identifying or founding an entity or setting up a network to share knowledge and best practices on improving care.

Willamette Valley health care stakeholders have launched numerous quality improvement efforts since the late 1990s. For example, health centers for the poor and uninsured participate in collaborative projects to improve diabetes care and reduce racial and ethnic disparities in care. The state also has many quality improvement technical-assistance programs for clinicians and medical practices. In 2007, the state of Oregon convened a state-level health care reform commission that addressed quality improvement in its recommendations. The Quality Corporation's board also recently completed a strategic plan that identifies increased coordination of quality improvement efforts as its top new initiative.

The Quality Corporation is developing a physician quality improvement Web site and related manuals and guides in collaboration with the state's Medicare quality improvement organization. Beginning in mid-2009, physicians will be able to use the confidential and secure site to download quality-of-care data about their patients to target areas within their practices for improvement. The Quality Corporation is conducting listening sessions with practitioners to identify both barriers to and opportunities for using the quality data and is taking steps to help providers use the data for improvement.

Additionally, the Quality Corporation has advised the 2009 state Legislative Assembly on (1) the quality of health care in Oregon; (2) opportunities and options for a state health care Quality Institute; and (3) physician practice redesign and patient-centered medical home pilot projects—a model of care based on a strong doctor-patient relationship that emphasizes coordinated care over long periods instead of episodic care based on illnesses and patient health complaints. The Quality Corporation also is submitting articles on quality improvement to local medical newsletters and encouraging Oregon hospitals to participate in national quality improvement collaboratives.

Aligning Forces for Quality

The premise of AF4Q is that these strategies—public reporting and performance measurement, consumer engagement and quality improvement—must be implemented in a coordinated way in order to lift the overall quality of health care. That is why the overarching goal of both the national AF4Q program and the Quality Corporation in the Willamette Valley is to bring community stakeholders together to drive change on these three critical fronts to improve health and health care quality.

For more information about AF4Q in the Willamette Valley, visit www.q-corp.org and www.rwjf.org/qualityequality/af4q/communities/willamette.jsp.

Research for this report was provided by the Aligning Forces for Quality Evaluation Team at Penn State University's Center for Health Care and Policy Research, which is studying the AF4Q initiative to gain insights about community-based reform that can guide health care practice and policy. For more information, visit www.hbdev.psu.edu/CHCPR/activities/project_alignforce.html.

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¹2005 American Hospital Association Annual Survey of Hospitals (taken from the 2007 HRSA Area Resource File).

²2006 American Medical Association Physician Masterfile (taken from the 2007 HRSA Area Resource File).

³2004 American Osteopathic Association (taken from the 2007 HRSA Area Resource File).

⁴2007 Population Estimates—U.S. Census Bureau.

⁵2005–2007 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates.

⁶2005 Census Small Area Health Insurance Estimates.