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An Answer to PPE Shortages and High Prices: Washington Healthcare Community Bands Together to Buy Quality PPE as a Group

SEATTLE, Wash., December 17, 2020 – A unique Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) Purchasing Co-Op has so far helped 675 healthcare organizations of all types and sizes across Washington state purchase necessary PPE to keep offices and clinics open and ensure the safety of patients and staff. This collaborative effort has already helped hundreds and will continue to support healthcare organizations in their efforts to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hundreds of thousands of boxes of PPE were delivered in November, with more expected in the next several weeks, for dental offices, doctor offices, skilled nursing facilities, assisted living facilities, community health clinics, hospitals, optometrists, pharmacists, chiropractors and other healthcare organizations across the state.

It began in August when the Governor’s office and private sector health care leaders engaged a group of stakeholders to determine if a collaborative purchasing arrangement could help address existing shortages. The idea of leveraging group buying power would mean small as well as large organizations could purchase essential PPE to keep patients and staff safe and keep their doors open during the pandemic. Last spring, restrictions were placed on “non-urgent” health care due to concerns about PPE shortages.

Interested members of this group decided to create the Washington PPE Purchasing Co-op, and by November they had moved from exploring options to conducting their first group purchase of PPE.

So far, the group has helped 675 organizations purchase approximately 275,000 individual units of N95 respirators, nearly 2.1 million individual units of surgical masks, and more than 15,000 gowns.

“This unique moment in time called for us to come together as a local healthcare community. We all wanted the same thing: to ensure people continue to have access to health care services they need and to keep the people delivering that care protected from infection,” said Cassie Sauer, Chief Executive Officer of the Washington State Hospital Association.

The group partnered with PPE.Exchange, a Seattle-based online PPE marketplace offering collaboratives the ability to source critical personal protective equipment direct from manufacturers, and place group orders for bulk pricing with vetted suppliers and products.

“To maintain safety, more PPE is needed now than ever before - in all types of care settings. But how is the typical small health care facility supposed to navigate the complicated world of PPE manufacturing, vet the good from the bad, and get what they need at a reasonable price? It was daunting; so, the associations joined together and stepped in as a collaborative to help our members,” said Bracken Kilpack, Executive Director, Washington State Dental Association. “Our first job was to find a vendor who knew the ins and outs of PPE purchasing and had a direct line to vetted manufacturers.”

PPE.Exchange was formed to help combat issues in the PPE market such as fraudulent products, price-gouging, and requirements for large minimum orders.

“We started our platform in April 2020, when we realized we could use the skills we had learned in our professional careers to solve the problems we were seeing in the PPE market during the pandemic. Eight months later, we are working with healthcare associations and organizations in more than a third of the states across the country to source PPE more efficiently. In Washington it is exciting to see associations that represent such a diverse group of healthcare organizations work together in this way. We haven’t seen that in other parts of the country,” said JT Garwood, Co-Founder of PPE.Exchange.

Six associations representing dentists, hospitals, doctors, senior care and housing organizations, assisted living and skilled nursing facilities, and community health clinics, along with MultiCare, initiated the

group buy. Six other associations joined, bringing in chiropractors, pharmacists, denturists, optometrists and other healthcare providers.

These associations took a central role in coordinating the group purchase, working with PPE.Exchange, and managing communications directly with their members. The Washington Healthcare Forum and OneHealthPort contributed staffing for the effort. “The healthcare associations in this state have taken on a leadership role on a crucial topic during an incredibly difficult time. It is impressive what they have accomplished in a short amount of time,” said Rick Rubin, Executive Director of the Washington Healthcare Forum and CEO of OneHealthPort.

A wide swath of healthcare providers and organizations ranging in size from single provider practices to large hospital systems participated, some buying masks and respirators by the case, and others buying smaller quantities.

“This collaboration focused on ensuring availability, affordability and access to the critical PPE supplies has been one of the positive outcomes responding to COVID-19,” said Jason Moulding, MultiCare System Vice President, Supply Chain Management. “It has been a privilege to have a direct role in this partnership and inspiring to see competing healthcare organizations and other health delivery organizations come together to help solve these supply shortages to protect our caregivers, our patients and our communities.”

“It was important to us to keep the whole process very lean and open to all. This is not a membership group or pay-to-play. All payments are handled directly between PPE.Exchange and the healthcare organizations purchasing the PPE,” said Laura Hofmann, Director of Clinical and Nursing Facility Regulatory Services, Leading Age WA. “The associations are contributing time and energy to the project as a way to help our members and keep them solvent, but we don’t charge any fees to members or receive payment from the vendor.”

“Once it all came together, we were really excited about the potential to band together to drive down the price of PPE, especially for the smaller organizations throughout the state,” said Kilpack. “Whether there will be future orders depends on the need, but it is great to know that we can do this together for the good of all.”

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Participating Associations

- Washington State Dental Association (WSDA)
- Washington State Hospital Association (WSHA)
- Washington State Medical Association (WSMA)
- Leading Age WA
- Washington Health Care Association
- Washington Association for Community Health
- Optometric Physicians of Washington
- Washington State Chiropractic Association
- Washington State Pharmacy Association
- Bainbridge Prepares
- Washington Denturist Association
- Washington Council for Behavioral Health

PPE Exchange

PPE.Exchange is a wholesale marketplace that solves pandemic driven issues by providing seamless technological solutions and promoting supply chain transparency. The three co-founders of PPE.Exchange have backgrounds in software engineering, blockchain technology and enterprise technology. Together, they left their jobs to help rural hospitals access lifesaving protection after hearing the horror stories from family members in the healthcare industry. In just six months, PPE.Exchange has created a marketplace of over 1,000 verified PPE and testing vendors that streamlines supply chain transactions and helps essential / frontline workers access lifesaving equipment. For more information visit www.PPE.Exchange.

Washington PPE Purchasing Co-Op

With the heightened need for PPE due to the novel coronavirus, and the cost and shortage of reliable PPE, a public-private collaborative group of healthcare associations and organizations have come together to facilitate group purchasing of vetted, high quality PPE. For more information visit www.onehealthport.com/ppe-coop.

Washington Healthcare Forum

Founded in 1999, the Washington Healthcare Forum is a coalition of physicians, hospitals, health plans and state associations that have joined together to improve the local health care system. For more information visit www.wahealthcareforum.org.