

# Benefis Health System Community Health Improvement Plan 2020-2022





**Note From  
Benefis Health  
System Chief  
Executive  
Officer John  
Goodnow**

Fellow Cascade County Residents,

Benefis Health System is pleased to release our plan to support the 2020-2022 Cascade County Community Health Improvement Plan. Members of the Benefis team have been working closely with the Cascade County Healthy Lives, Vibrant Futures coalition steering committee to conduct a new Community Health Needs Assessment and develop the 2020-2022 Cascade County Community Health Improvement Plan.

As the largest private employer in Cascade County and the primary provider of many essential health services in our region, we know we play a vital role in improving community health, and we take that responsibility seriously.

We are looking forward to continuing our work with our many community partners and the Cascade County Healthy Lives, Vibrant Futures group over the next three years to continue to improve the health of our community.

Sincerely,  
John Goodnow

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## Introduction and Background

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Every three years, organizations in our community work together to conduct a Community Health Needs Assessment, a study that outlines top health concerns throughout the community.

That study is then used to formulate the Cascade County Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP). Our community's first CHIP was released in 2011, with updates published in 2013, 2016, and 2019.

Benefis, as our region's primary healthcare provider, uses each iteration of the CHIP document to formulate a coordinating plan to help our community achieve its health-related goals.

This document contains a summary of the activities Benefis completed in support of the goals outlined in the 2017-2019 Cascade County CHIP, which was released in 2016.

In addition to that summary, this report outlines our plans to support community health improvement going forward based on the latest community goals, outlined in the 2020-2022 Cascade County CHIP.

The 2019 Community Health Needs Assessment that drove the most recent Cascade County CHIP identified four priorities, which are the same priorities as identified in 2016. Those priorities include:

- **Access to Care** – We aim to improve Cascade County residents' ability to access appropriate healthcare.
- **Substance Misuse** – We aim to reduce the improper use of alcohol, tobacco, and legal/illegal drugs.
- **Healthy Weight** – We aim to increase the percentage of Cascade County residents at a healthy weight.
- **Child Abuse** – We aim to decrease the number of child abuse and neglect cases in our region.

## About Benefis Health System

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### **Behind every statistic is a story.**

At Benefis Health System, we believe that the pursuit of better health requires going beyond the walls of our hospital, clinics, senior care facilities, and specialty services.

That's why we team up with the City-County Health Department, the Community Health Center, United Way of Cascade County, and other partners to understand and address health needs in our community.

Our goal is not just to provide the best treatment for patients but also to help the people of our community avoid health crises. We'd rather offer every skier a free helmet than treat a concussion later; we'd prefer to hold a class now so a newly diagnosed diabetic can learn to manage her insulin and diet than have to perform an amputation later; and we'd choose seeing a patient today to treat a minor condition over waiting until it becomes a major problem tomorrow.

Benefis began with the Columbus Hospital, founded in 1892 by Catholic Sisters, and Deaconess Hospital, founded by Methodists in 1898. The hospitals merged in 1996, creating Benefis. Our name comes from Latin roots "bene-" for good and "fis-" for faith and trust. Today our health system consists of not only a traditional hospital and nearly 300 employed providers staffing outpatient clinics, but also assisted living and long-term care facilities, home health services, hospice care, and more.

Our commitment to the good health of our friends and neighbors has been the driving force behind our evolution from a hospital into a comprehensive health system. Benefis is recognized for clinical excellence by leading health ratings organizations and is also recognized as a great place to work.

We take seriously and are deeply involved in weighing results from the community health needs assessment, in responding to the needs identified, and in thinking through what comes next. This document is our way of sharing that ongoing conversation and updating stakeholders on the work we're doing to make our community healthier.

We talk in numbers, programs, dollars, and services, but behind every statistic are the people whose lives have been changed in ways large and small through our efforts.

# Summary of 2017-2019 Health Improvement Efforts

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Over the past few years, Benefis has been committed to supporting key components of the 2017-2019 Cascade County Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) in the areas where we could make the most difference. The following describes our efforts to work towards the priorities and goals outlined in the County’s CHIP document.

## Priority Area One: Improve Cascade County Residents’ Ability to Access Appropriate Healthcare

### Goal One – Improve Access to Medical and Urgent Care Services for Cascade County Residents

Access to care improves lives within our community. Benefis works tirelessly to ensure that everyone in our community who needs care can get it in a convenient and affordable manner. Whether it’s through improving and expanding our direct care offering or facilitating donations such as our recent contribution of medical supplies to the Great Falls Rescue Mission’s onsite clinic, we’re a part of the Great Falls community and want to do everything we can to further local care.

#### *Focus on Affordability*

Cost, specifically uncertainty about cost, serves as a substantial hurdle to people accessing healthcare. Benefis has been committed to running our organization in a cost-conscious manner and focusing on patient affordability for years. In particular, the following represent major areas of emphasis for our organization related to affordability:

- **Reducing Our Own Costs** – Benefis has been focused on cost reduction since 2008, realizing that reducing our own costs can translate into less cost shifting towards commercially-insured patients. We achieved Medicare Breakeven status in 2012 and have maintained it each year since, something that few to no other hospitals in the nation have accomplished.
- **Providing Financial Assistance** – At Benefis, our financial assistance policy stretches to 400 percent of the federal poverty level, which represented an annual income of \$103,000 for a family of four in 2019. Further, patients who don’t have insurance coverage for a particular episode of care and who don’t qualify for financial assistance are still eligible for a 40 percent uninsured discount.
- **Maintaining a Prompt-Pay Discount.** – Patients receiving care at Benefis are given estimates of the price of services, detailing their likely out-of-pocket financial responsibility based on their insurance coverage and anticipated charges. Patients are then offered discounts of up to 15 percent for paying their bills up-front or within 30 days of treatment.
- **Offering In- and Out-of-Network Education** – Nationwide, patients often face nasty surprises after having treatment and learning that part of the service they received was out-of-network for their insurer and significantly more expensive than expected. In this increasingly complex healthcare environment, Benefis has

worked to educate the public about how to avoid out-of-network bills. Through advertising and media coverage, we have published a list of in-network insurance products at Benefis, along with details regarding how to determine whether your insurance will cover a given course of treatment from a particular provider.

Benefis also employs most of its own providers, thus ensuring that when patients come to Benefis, their care is treated consistently by their insurance company.

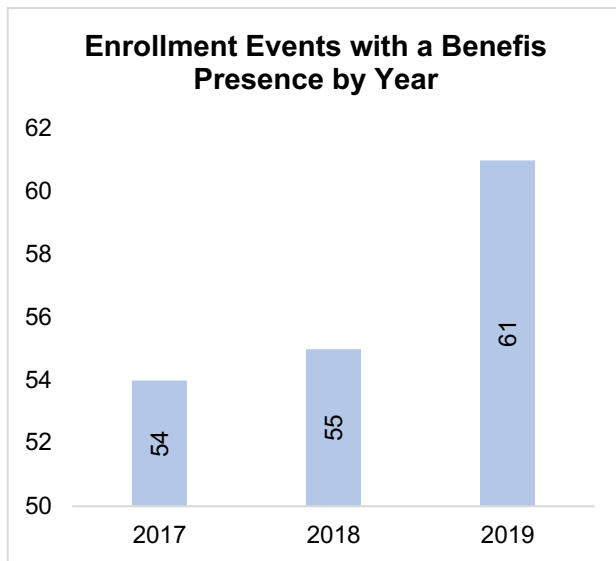
When we do work with external provider groups to offer services or as part of a course of treatment, we take the following steps so patients avoid encountering out-of-network bills:

- Our support physician contracts require that the providers not employed by Benefis adhere to the same insurance networks as employed providers when treating Benefis patients.
- When using external labs to read specialized tests, we work to ensure that the external labs adhere to the same insurance networks as our internal lab does.
- Air ambulance transportation bills have been a nightmare for patients in Montana, and patients have been charged as much as \$85,000 because the air ambulance that rescued them was out-of-network. At Benefis, we own our air ambulance service, so that life-saving service is in-network for all of the same plans as our providers.
- **Helping Families Find Affordable Accommodations** – For the past three decades, Benefis has provided free lodging to patients and their families through our Gift of Life Housing facilities. We also contract with the Great Falls Inn to provide discounted hotel room rates for patients when needed.

### ***Political Advocacy and Enrollment Assistance***

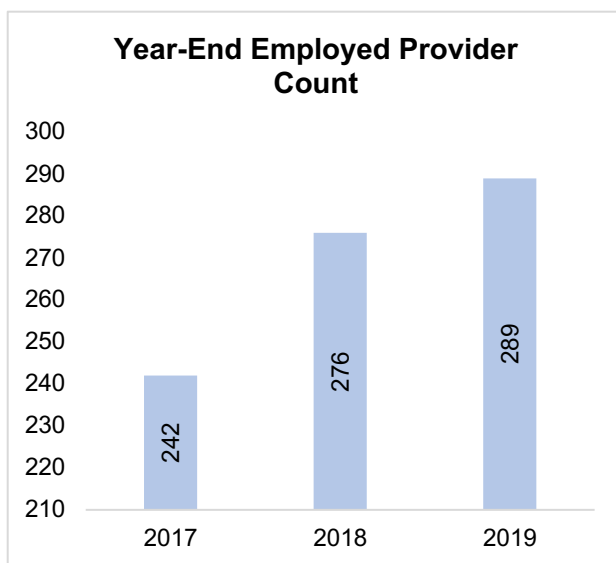
Perhaps the most notable way in which care access throughout our region is assured is through the continuation of Medicaid Expansion in Montana. The legislation that expanded Medicaid in our state was first passed in 2015 and was up for renewal in 2019. Benefis played an important role in advocating for the program's renewal to ensure continued coverage for the more than 100,000 individuals (including more than 6,000 Cascade County residents) enrolled in the program. Without this program, current enrollees would likely revert to being uninsured, greatly restricting their access to care.

Beyond advocating for Medicaid Expansion itself, Benefis is committed to helping people enroll for coverage through Medicaid Expansion and/or other health insurance programs they may qualify for. Our certified health benefits advisors meet with patients in our hospital to discuss future coverage options with them, and our dedicated enrollment specialist attended numerous community events (including working with inmates at pre-release facilities, families at Head Start programs, college students, seniors, and others) from 2017-2019 to help people enroll in coverage as shown here:



***Provider Recruitment and Retention***

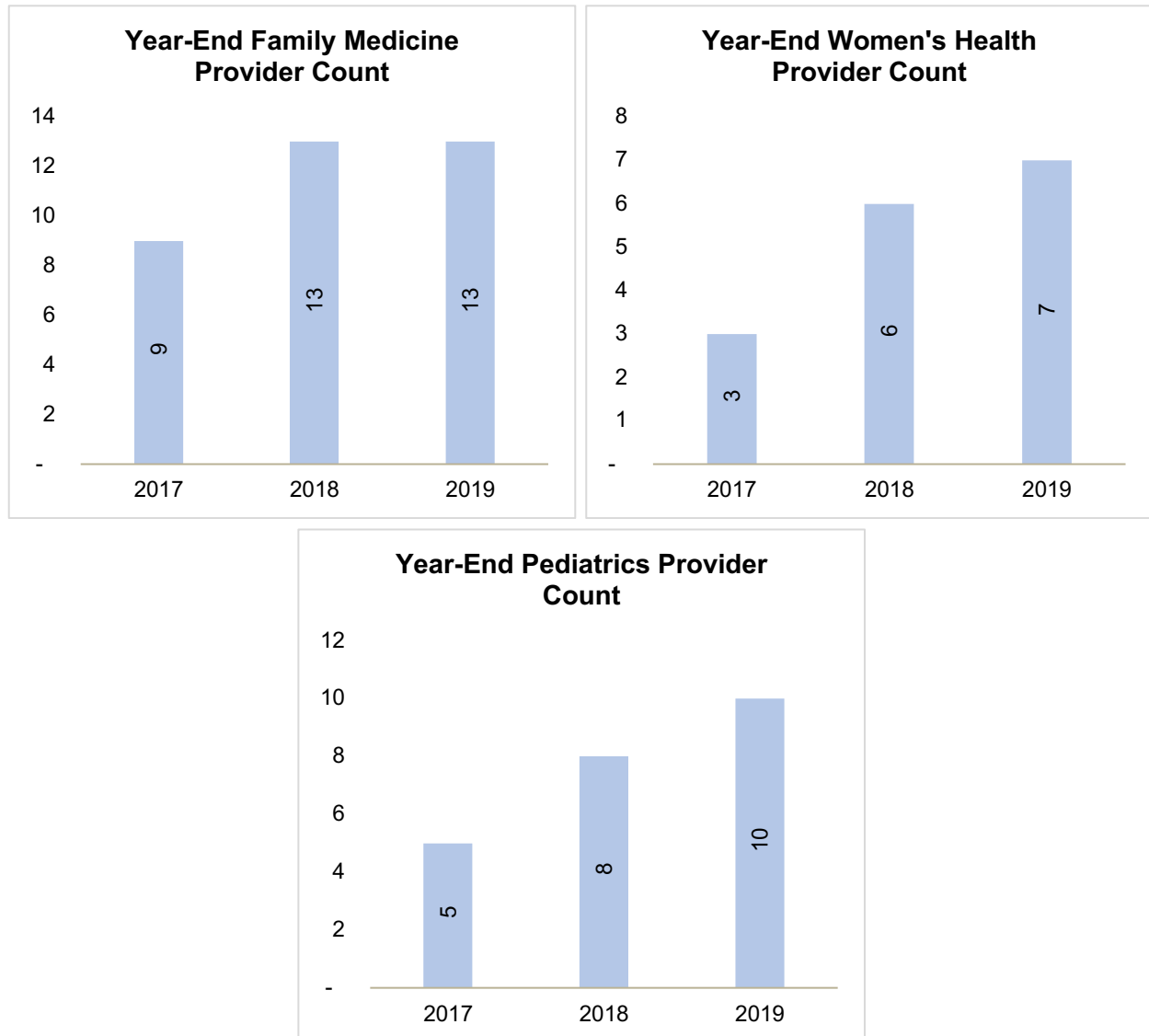
With the provider shortages the nation faces, lack of appointment availability often represents a hurdle to patient access. In response to that reality, Benefis has made recruiting and retaining providers a priority, growing our employed provider base as follows from the end of 2017 through the end of 2019:





### Primary Care Prioritization

Primary care providers are the key facilitators of access to specialty care, helping funnel patients to appropriate access points throughout our health system. Through our community outreach efforts and advertising, Benefis has prioritized educating the community on the importance of having a primary care provider, while bolstering our family medicine, women’s health, and pediatrics clinical practices as follows:



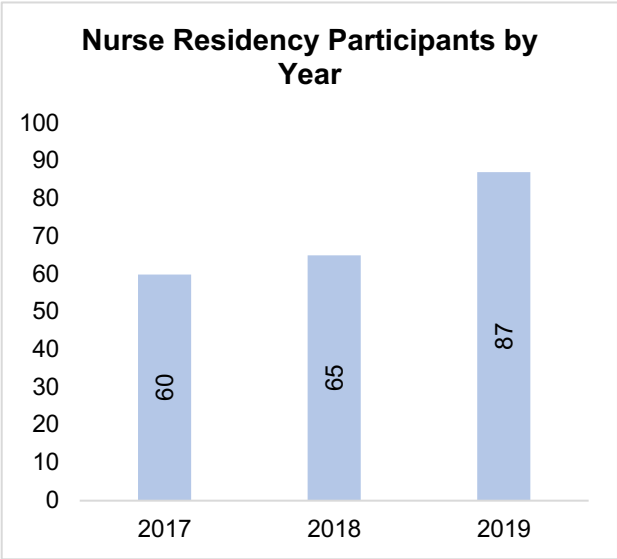
*Note, Pediatrics provider count includes pediatric psychiatry, neuropsychology, and endocrinology providers added in 2018 and 2019. Pediatrics and Family Medicine visits include those originating from Benefis Northwest.*

We work to ensure that everyone discharged from our hospital has a primary care provider to ensure follow-up care and ongoing wellness. People with a primary care doctor are more likely to have chronic conditions under control and get regular preventative care, reducing their odds of hospitalization.

**Training Our Future Workforce**

A key part of access is developing our staff so we have the workforce to care for patients. From 2017-2019, we supported workforce development in the following ways:

- From 2017-2019 we trained 613 new certified nursing assistants, 10 home health aides, and 13 medication aides through our training programs, which are housed in a classroom and simulation space that was remodeled in 2018 to be more effective.
- Our Foundation gave \$97,800 worth of scholarships in 2019, including those offered to students in the newly developed University of Providence certified medical assistant program. Such offerings encourage students to become caregivers without the cost of doing so holding them back.
- In conjunction with Great Falls Public Schools, we offered 33 job shadowing opportunities and five internships from 2017-2019. To boost students’ interest in the medical field, Benefis also takes part in student career fairs, conducts mock interviews, and helps with career readiness.
- We offer an ongoing training or “residency” program for new nurses in our emergency, critical care, and inpatient medical departments, with the following participation from 2017-2019:

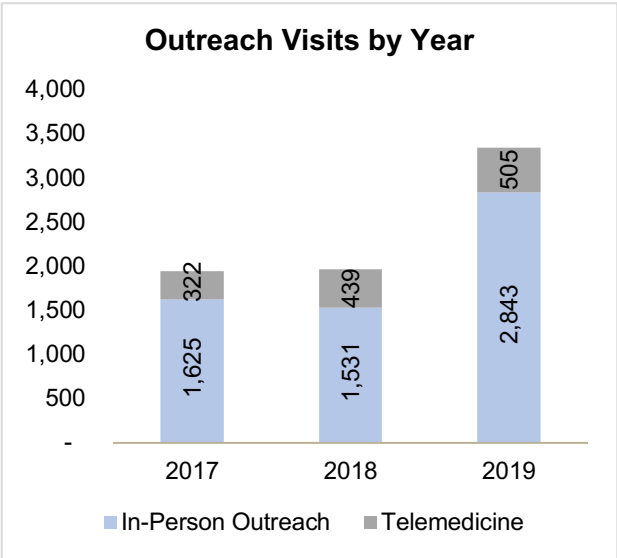


This program gives our new nurses the skills they need to become more effective and efficient in treating some of our sickest patients.

**Service Location and Format Convenience**

A major component of care access is the convenience with which care is located and the format in which it is offered. To facilitate service convenience, we did the following from 2017-2019:

- **Expanding Regional Outreach** – With our large service area, much of it rural, Benefis has expanded both our telemedicine and in-person provider outreach offerings throughout the past few years, with visit counts growing as follows:



Our outreach presence spans services including cardiology, oncology, maternal-fetal medicine, and many more, offered across 15 regional communities. From 2017-2019, Benefis also added two leadership roles dedicated to regional outreach and telemedicine, ensuring that we continue to place emphasis on growth in that arena going forward.

- **Establishing Benefis Northwest** – Benefis Northwest began accepting patients in May 2019. The new 7,600- square-foot facility expanded the presence of our primary care services by offering family medicine and pediatrics in a new location along with a full array of urgent care services, including lab and imaging. Benefis Northwest is staffed with two pediatricians and four family medicine providers, offering convenient and comprehensive care in a brand-new facility.
- **Renovating Our Emergency Department** – In June of 2017, we broke ground on the new Benefis Emergency Department. Construction was carefully paced to allow the department to remain completely functional throughout the entire remodel, which was completed in December of 2018. The project nearly doubled the size of the emergency department, allowing more efficient care with shorter wait times. Among the enhancements included in the project are high-tech equipment, 15 additional patient rooms, a sexual assault exam suite, and a behavioral health treatment room for patients facing an acute psychiatric crisis. An enclosed ambulance garage with covered drive-through access was also added so patients aren't exposed to Montana's intemperate weather. We now

have the largest emergency department in the state of Montana, and experienced the following successes through the upgraded department in 2019:

- The department saw 756 more patients in 2019 than in 2018.
- 255 fewer people chose to leave the department before they started treatment, despite the department seeing more patients.
- Patients' time in the department from door to discharge dropped by 16 minutes from 2018 to 2019.

### ***Ease of Scheduling Improvement***

Sometimes picking up the phone to make an appointment is enough of a barrier to access that people won't see a doctor, particularly if they work during normal business hours when our clinics are open and our phones are answered. That's especially true for younger patients, busy patients, and those with hearing challenges. To mitigate that barrier, Benefis implemented online scheduling for key service lines (including all of our primary care services) in November of 2018 to improve access to our clinics. So far, more than half of the appointments made through our online scheduling platform have been made after-hours, when our clinics would not have been available to schedule an appointment via phone call.

### ***Transportation Facilitation***

With long distances and extremely limited public transportation options for most of our service area, Benefis has made helping patients find a way to reach services a priority. From 2017-2019, Benefis Spectrum Medical made 8,779 patient transports to urgent care and medical appointments. Benefis also partners with Blacked Out 406 Taxi to provide transportation for patients as they discharge from the hospital, and to assist patients in getting back to Benefis for follow-up appointments. Finally, for the past eight years, Benefis has supported Northern Transit Interlocal, which was formed to serve five counties across Montana with transportation to and from medical facilities so patients can access the care they need.

### ***Supporting Healthier Hearts***

In 2018, Benefis opened an anticoagulation clinic, offering patients at risk of forming blood clots a new access point to help them monitor and manage their conditions. In the same year, we also received a cardiovascular health grant from the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services. The grant allowed us to add a dedicated care coordinator in March of 2019 to help support patients diagnosed with hypertension (high blood pressure) and hyperlipidemia (high rate of fats in the blood), with the goal of intervening before they develop serious health crises. Facets of the grant-driven program include:

- The care coordinator conducts outreach and reviews proper blood pressure techniques, lifestyle changes, medication, and more with patients. The coordinator contacts patients weekly or biweekly for blood pressure readings, to review medication adherence, and to work on other objectives. The coordinator works closely with patients' providers and nursing staff.



- The coordinator also seeks lower-cost medication alternatives for patients, realizing that cost drastically impacts whether patients stick to prescribed drug regimes.
- So far, the program has also loaned 58 blood pressure monitors to patients, enabling them to better manage their conditions.

### ***Community Education***

If patients don't know services exist, they won't access the services. That's why Benefis sponsors and participates in numerous events aimed at educating the community about available healthcare alternatives. Some of the community education we completed from 2017-2019 included:

- In 2019, we supported the Peace Place Summer Respite Programs, which provide practical support and hope to families whose children have medical diagnoses and/or developmental delays.
- We provided resources for attendees at the 2019 Community Baby Shower, put on by United Way of Cascade County. At the event, Benefis provided education relevant to new mothers regarding the safe care of their babies, promoting a healthy start for our youngest community members.
- Members of the Benefis Labor and Delivery team participated in the Walk, Lunch, & Latch event organized by Family Connections of Great Falls to celebrate World Breastfeeding Week.

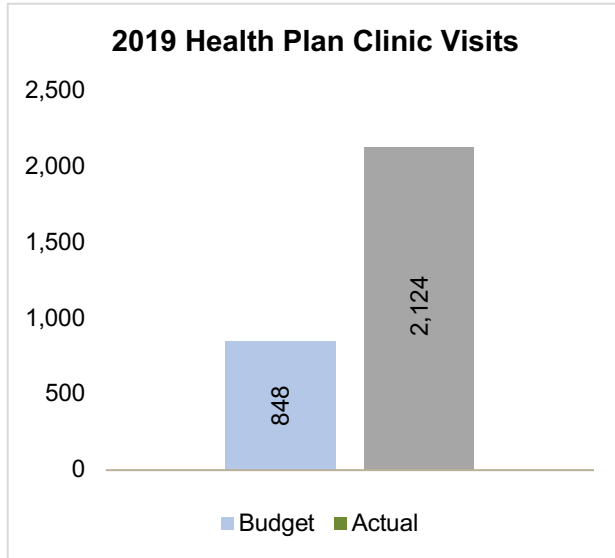
### ***Improving Employee Health***

As the largest private employer in Cascade County, Benefis not only treats patients, we employ a large base of potential patients and want to ensure that they can afford their care.

Beginning in January 2019, Benefis began offering employees and their dependents two different health insurance coverage options – a high-deductible, health savings account-eligible plan, as well as a plan known as the Affordable Plus Plan. Both plans divide covered providers into three tiers, with the Affordable Plus Plan offering enrollees the following benefits when visiting Tier 1 providers:

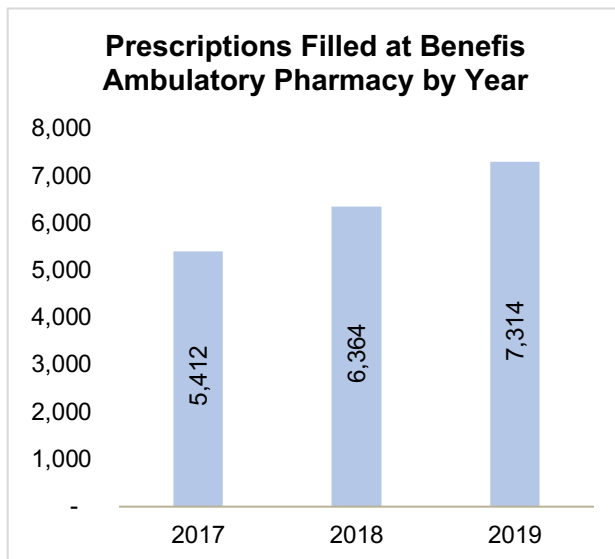
- \$35 primary care provider visits
- \$35 behavioral health provider visits
- 10% coinsurance for prescriptions before deductible is met

Another major benefit of the new plan was the addition of Benefis Health Plan Clinic, a minor care clinic offering Affordable Plus Plan enrollees free visits and offering High-Deductible Health Plan enrollees \$45 visits. The budget for visits to the clinic was developed using a projection based on weekday visits employees made to our urgent care clinics in 2018. However, the clinic's actual 2019 visit count far exceeded projections, indicating that the availability of the cheaper alternative persuaded our employees to get care they may have otherwise foregone.



The above visit count includes the evaluation of patients with appendicitis, pancreatitis, multiple cancers, cellulitis, and more.

Finally, Benefis is able to pass its 340B drug discounts along to its health plan enrollees, meaning that employees on the Affordable Plus Plan only pay \$1 for several crucial drugs that could cost up to \$1,450 from a retail pharmacy. The ambulatory pharmacy we operate for employees and their dependents enrolled in our health plan filled close to 20,000 prescriptions from 2017-2019 and saved employees a total of \$4.6 million compared to retail price:



## **Goal Two – Improve Access to Dental Services for Cascade County Residents**

Benefis does not provide dental services as part of its care continuum, but we have developed a specific referral process from our employed providers to local dentists who will accept patients without insurance or with limited insurance. Additionally, Benefis Spectrum Medical transported 172 patients to dental services in Cascade County from 2017-2019.

## **Goal Three – Improve Behavioral Healthcare for Cascade County Residents**

Montana is no exception to the behavioral health crisis that plagues our nation. In fact, by some statistics, including our status as the state with the highest suicide rate, it appears that Montana may be more impacted than others. As mentioned in the previous section, when building our new emergency department, Benefis included a two-room behavioral health suite with a separate bathroom and observation anteroom. The facility means a patient facing a psychiatric crisis can be cared for in a safe, secure, and calming setting. Our additional efforts to improve access to behavioral health services from 2017-2019 are outlined in the following section.

### ***Training Our Future Workforce***

Building a stronger social worker workforce will help improve access to behavioral health services long-term. In 2019, Benefis gave a financial contribution to Carroll College for the startup of the school's Master of Science in Social Work program. This program will prepare students to become Licensed Clinical Social Workers, a profession in high demand in the healthcare industry, specifically in Montana and Cascade County.

### ***Community Education***

In both 2018 and 2019, Benefis helped sponsor the Out of Darkness Suicide Prevention Walk organized by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. In addition to that, we supported the seventh annual Montana Conference on Suicide Prevention, a statewide effort to bring together Montanans in a collaborative effort to reduce suicide in our state.

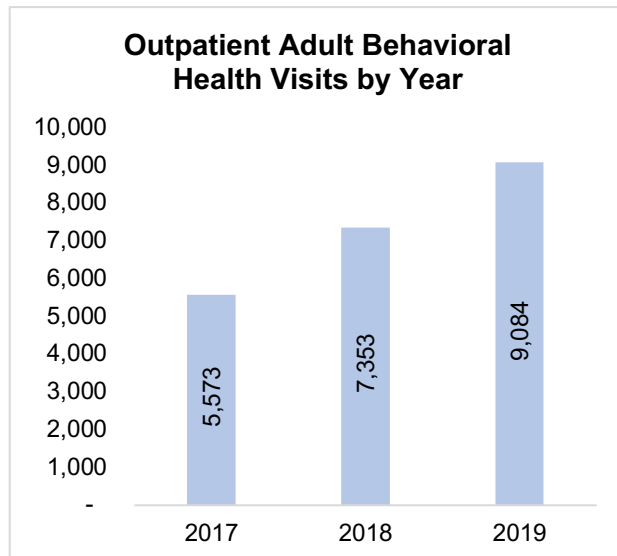
For the past eight years, Benefis has organized the Men & Machines Car and Bike Show, an event geared towards men's health. At the event, we pass out information about mental health and have experts on-hand to answer questions. In April of 2019 we also hosted a free educational event with members of our behavioral health department who discussed various aspects of mental health care.

### ***Provider Recruitment and Retention***

From 2017-2019, Benefis hired several providers that touch our behavioral health realm, bolstering our interdisciplinary behavioral health programs through a variety of types of specialists ranging from pain management and neurosciences providers to psychiatrists and counselors.

In the pediatric realm, we added both a pediatric psychiatrist and pediatric neuropsychologist, both specialties that are in great shortage in our community.

Further, the following shows the growth we experienced in outpatient adult visits associated with behavioral health codes from 2017-2019:



## Priority Area Two: Reduce Substance Misuse, Including Alcohol, Tobacco, and Legal/Illegal Drugs

- **Goal One – Reduce the Number of Youth and Adults Misusing Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Substances**
- **Goal Two – Reduce the Percentage of Cascade County Adults (Ages 18-24) That Misuse Substances**

Our nation's mental health crisis is closely tied to a worsening substance abuse epidemic. Benefis has embarked on several initiatives to reduce substance misuse in our community.

### ***Adding Providers to Expand Treatment Possibilities***

From 2017-2019, Benefis added several providers who work with patients impacted by substance misuse, among them a doctor specializing in addiction medicine and a maternal-fetal medicine specialist who helps in high-risk pregnancy cases, including those resulting from babies being born with drug exposure and/or addiction.

### ***Leveraging Grants to Curb Drug Use***

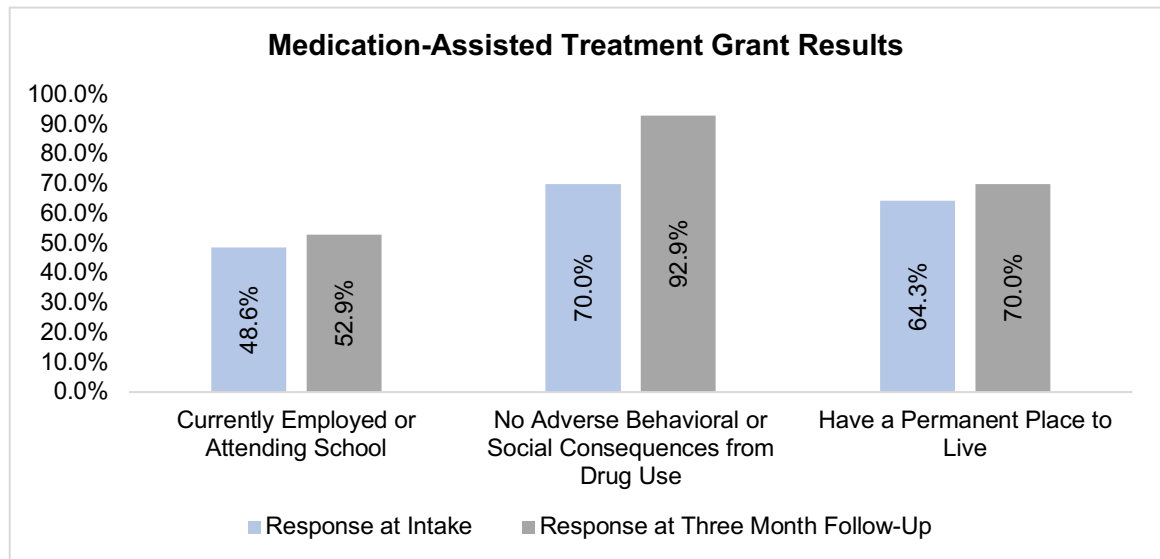
Benefis has received the following grants aimed at curbing drug use in our region:

- **Montana Healthcare Foundation Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS) Grant** – This grant targets the care management of mothers with substance abuse disorders. NAS is a condition in which an infant is born physically addicted to a drug he or she was exposed to while in utero, causing the infant to experience chemical withdrawals after birth. Benefis treats infants who are born with NAS as well as those who are transferred to our facility from regional



hospitals after being born with NAS. We treated 74 infants for NAS in 2018, and the average duration of those patients' hospitalizations was 27.3 days. In 2019, 93 percent of women participating in our grant-led NAS program demonstrated positive behavioral changes, including substance abuse disorder relapse prevention and successful mother-child reunification.

- **Health Resources and Services Administration Opioid Prevention Planning Grant** – This grant was awarded to a regional coalition Benefis is a member of rather than directly to Benefis, and it focuses on the development of a regional plan to prevent opioid misuse and identify treatment needs.
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Medication-Assisted Treatment Grant** – This grant targets the treatment of substance abuse disorders in Native Americans and other vulnerable populations in rural areas.
  - Participants in the program funded through this grant receive a combination of medication-assisted therapy, counseling, and recovery support.
  - The program has enrolled 132 patients, and has shown the following results:



- Feedback from program participants has included the following:
  - “Thank you for saving my life.”
  - “It really saved my life, family, finances.”
  - “I love you guys. Thank you!”
  - “This place has helped so much.”
  - “They actually care about your wellbeing here.”
  - “I found the help I have been looking for a long time here and I feel even more positive about my recovery. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.”
  - “Thank you for supporting people like myself because without this program, I would be back where I started.”

### ***Supporting Drug Management***

As we leverage the various parts of our health system to reduce drug misuse, representatives from the Benefis pharmacy department attend pain management and behavioral health meetings to weigh in on treatment courses involving certain medications.

In continuing our commitment to encourage responsible drug use and disposal, Benefis also installed two medication collection receptacles for public use. Benefis Teton Medical Center also installed one of these collection bins. Patients and patients' families utilize the bins to safely dispose of unused medication. These new community collection boxes were acquired as part of a 2018 Montana state grant to the Department of Public Health and Human Services to reduce the misuse of prescription drugs.

### ***Assisting Community Partners***

Benefis received the Mountain-Pacific 2018 Healthcare Quality Award for our opioid management efforts. Our efforts extend beyond our own walls and have included these projects from 2017-2019:

- Donated Narcan (an opioid-reversing agent to prevent overdoses) to the Great Falls Police Department and Great Falls Public School District.
- Provided statewide education on opioid prescribing guidelines and the use of the Montana Drug Registry.
- Mandated internal prescribing education for all emergency, urgent care, and surgical providers.
- Participated in a statewide event aimed at reducing substance abuse in conjunction with the Department of Justice and Department of Criminal Investigation.
- Provide clinical volunteers once a month at our local Veterans Treatment Court and Drug Treatment Court.
- Annually support the Sober Life Recovery Run organized by Alliance For Youth.

## **Priority Area Three: Increase the Percentage of Cascade County Residents at a Healthy Weight**

### **Goal One – Get Fit Great Falls Will Promote, Support, and Increase Active Lifestyles of Cascade County Residents**

Through both involvement in Get Fit Great Falls and our independent efforts, Benefis has worked throughout the past several years to promote active and healthy lifestyles.

#### ***Generating Results***

The sports medicine experts at Benefis provide trusted care for athletes of all ages and skill levels. They have developed the Results Sports and Fitness Training program at Benefis. It's a comprehensive system that provides rigorous, supervised, and safe physical training to take participants' skills and fitness to the next level. The certified athletic trainers in the Results program use proven training techniques to create personalized programs to help meet goals.

Benefis offers onsite fitness classes as a convenience to employees, and in 2019 we developed a fitness program specifically for cancer patients and survivors. Exercise helps reduce negative side effects from cancer treatment and helps with the mental aspect of fighting cancer.

### ***Expanding Fitness Options in the Community***

Benefis is a 51-percent owner of the Peak Health & Wellness Center in Great Falls, which supports maintaining a healthy weight through its fitness facilities and classes. In 2018, the Peak was expanded into a second Great Falls location on the west side of the community, making going to the gym more accessible for members of the community living in that section of the city.

Benefis has worked to find synergies between our core health services offering and the Peak's fitness realm, including looking for opportunities for Peak members enrolled in fitness classes to establish care with primary care providers, and for Benefis patients completing physical therapy to join the Peak at a discounted rate.

### ***Education Through Benefis Health Sessions***

In 2018 and 2019, many of the monthly healthcare education events Benefis hosts centered around weight loss and healthy living. For example, in one presentation, our weight loss specialists presented on fad diets, hormones, medications, and psychological issues related to weight loss. They also touched on metabolic and bariatric surgery. In another presentation, Benefis cardiothoracic surgeon Dr. Steven Bailey and special guest Joe Piscatella presented to encourage people to initiate and sustain healthy lifestyle habits through stress management, better eating habits, and regular exercise.

### ***Supporting Community Initiatives***

Two-thirds of Cascade County adults are overweight or obese. Our efforts throughout the community to promote a healthy, active lifestyle have included the following:

- **Sponsoring the Healthy Montana Winter Kids Program** – Each year since 2012, funding from Benefis allowed every fourth-grade student at Great Falls Public Schools to participate in the Healthy Montana Winter Kids program. The goal of the program is to encourage children to pursue outdoor activities that will help them stay active and exposed to sunshine in the winter.
- **Providing First Aid at Fitness Events** – The premier fitness event in Great Falls, the Ice Breaker Road Race, is a great event to motivate people to exercise and to encourage families to enjoy fitness together. Benefis has provided first aid care for the past several years for the event. Benefis has also provided first aid care for the Spring Fling Hoop Thing, organized by Alliance for Youth.
- **Hosting the Safety First Rally** – The Benefis emergency services team hosted the Safety First Rally in both 2017 and 2018. The event was free and open to the public and promoted injury prevention in a fun, interactive way. Families were encouraged to attend, and children of all ages were invited to visit and participate at various safety displays. The event offered attendees car seat information,

details regarding proper skating gear, education related to hot water heater settings, railroad crossing safety tips, and more. Children attending the event also received free bike helmets.

- **Giving Away Ski Helmets** – From 2017-2019, the Benefis emergency services team gave more than 800 helmets to children and adults through an annual event hosted at Showdown Montana. The team fits the free helmets on the spot.
- **Participating in Community Fitness Efforts** – The following represent community efforts Benefis has been a part of:
  - Benefis supported the Get Fit Great Falls Park Pals Program, which brings programs promoting physical activity to neighborhood parks throughout the summer.
  - Partnering with other health leaders (particularly BlueCross BlueShield of Montana) and KaBOOM, a nonprofit that builds play areas, Benefis helped establish a new playground at West Bank Park.
  - Benefis was a gold-level sponsor of the Montana Special Olympics Summer Games from 2017-2019. Benefis collaborated with Special Olympics to provide free sports physicals and other related health screening services for the event's athletes. Dr. Paul Johnson of Benefis is the lead physician for Special Olympics Montana.
  - Benefis has supported YWCA's annual Rankin Run, a fun community health initiative.
  - In 2019, Benefis donated to the Great Falls Rotary Club to help resurface the basketball court at Camp Rotary.

### ***Developing the Healthy Lifestyle Program***

The Healthy Lifestyle Program is an organized group-based program designed to educate and guide patients through healthy lifestyle changes to reduce their risk of developing diabetes or other health conditions. The 12-month program is led by Benefis registered dietitians and includes topics on nutrition, exercise, and behavioral changes. We worked to grow and refine this program from 2017-2019.

### ***Promoting an Active Lifestyle through Benefis Spectrum Medical***

The Benefis Spectrum Medical retail store has compression socks, running shoes, and weight loss vitamins available for purchase. Additionally, from 2017-2019, the Benefis Spectrum Medical transportation service made 259 transports to gym facilities.

### **Goal Two – Get Fit Great Falls Will Promote, Support, and Increase the Number of People (Infants, Preschoolers, School-Age Children, Adults, and Elderly) Eating Nutritious Foods**

Healthy eating is a core component of a healthy lifestyle. That's why Benefis has shown just as strong of a commitment to nutrition as to exercise.

### ***Feeding the Hungry***

Each year from 2017-2019, Benefis helped feed hungry school children in Cascade County through financial contributions to the Backpacks4kids Program. The Great Falls



Community Food Bank distributes an average 16,000 backpacks of food each year to children in grades K-6 in Cascade County through the program.

Additionally, in honor of Doctors Day, Benefis made donations in 2018 and 2019 to the Food Bank help feed the hungry in Cascade County, and each week throughout the two years, our leadership team volunteered to deliver lunches to homebound Meals on Wheels subscribers.

### ***Taking a Holistic Approach***

Benefis recently added Dr. Marwan Bakhach, a pediatric endocrinologist, to our employed provider base. He helps children grow into health adults, treating patients as tiny as newborns and young people under 21 with endocrine conditions such as diabetes, thyroid issues, and obesity. He works with a team of providers to develop a comprehensive approach to tackling weight issues so young people can get a good start in life.

### ***Reaching Out to Reservations***

Montana's Native American population has a life expectancy nearly 20 years shorter than the rest of the population, and our outreach to area Reservations aims to reduce that gap. Better nutrition and fitness can help reduce rates of chronic disease, so from 2017-2019, our registered dietitians made five trips to the Rocky Boy Indian Reservation and participated in a variety of health fairs. Benefis dietitians also gave three presentations on the Reservation focused on holiday eating.

### **Goal Three – Get Fit Great Falls Will Remain Sustainable**

Several Benefis representatives serve on the Get Fit Great Falls board, assisting with the group's ongoing efforts to promote fitness in Great Falls.

## **Priority Area Four: Decrease the Number of Child Abuse and Neglect Cases in Cascade County**

- **Goal One – Reduce the Rate of Child Abuse and Neglect in Cascade County**
- **Goal Two – Ensure the Strategic Prevention Framework Drives Community-Based Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention and Reduction**

Cascade County has the highest rate of abuse/neglect cases in Montana. Recent statistics have shown that nearly 700 children are in foster care in the county, and of those, almost three-quarters of them were removed from their homes because of drug use. Benefis aims to address the issues resulting in neglect at their core, preventing children and parents alike from ending up in the environments that have been statistically shown to drive abuse.

### ***Educating New Parents***

Benefis offers a variety of education classes pertaining to childbirth. Understanding Birth is a comprehensive childbirth series that touches on topics such as newborn procedures, bathing, safety, and postpartum challenges. We believe that educating parents before their children are born better equips them to keep the children safe and manages their expectations proactively to avoid them ending up in an unmanageable stress setting.

We also recently received a grant enabling us to offer families in high-stress environments or with a history of substance abuse access to greater levels of prenatal support.

### ***Working for Affordable Housing***

Benefis has been an ongoing financial supporter of NeighborWorks Great Falls for many years, and maintains representation on the NeighborWorks board. The relationship between housing and healthcare is well documented and studies have shown that quality, affordable housing tremendously affects health outcomes of families and individuals. It's a vital issue for our staff, as well as our community.

### ***Supporting Community Initiatives***

Just as with the other priorities outlined in this document, Benefis does not operate in isolation. Instead, we work to support community partners who are aligned with us in the common goal of keeping our community safe. The following illustrate ways in which we strived to reduce instances of abuse in our community from 2017-2019 through local partnerships:

- Benefis staff members in the care coordination department sit on the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect Steering Committee. The committee focuses on reducing child abuse and neglect and improving communication and collaboration throughout the community.
- Benefis has been a sponsor of Cabaret for a Cause, an event put on by the Great Falls Children's Receiving Home and Junior League of Great Falls. Funds go towards meeting the needs of children who have been removed from their homes as a result of heinous acts of child abuse. The Great Falls Children's Receiving Home is the only emergency shelter care in Cascade County.
- Benefis supported the Big Brother Big Sisters of Great Falls and Helena for their community-based mentoring programs. These programs help defend the potential of the most at-risk youth in our community.
- Benefis donated to Family Promise of Great Falls. They are a non-emergency, non-traditional shelter. Their mission is to end childhood homelessness, one family at a time.
- Benefis supported Rhinestones and Rodeo, the annual fundraiser for Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies. Their efforts are focused on current maternal and child health needs in our community and state. The group provides free educational material to patients and families. They offer free cribs and sleepers with education to families about Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, free car seats, and more.

- Benefis supported Leadership Great Falls in efforts to raise money for the Dandelion Foundation. The mission of the Dandelion Foundation is to prevent child abuse and family violence and to provide education and intervention to all groups of people by educating and supporting those at risk for, experiencing, or surviving abuse.
- In 2017, Benefis supported the Great Falls Exchange Club with a monetary donation for their child abuse programs and scholarships for those in need in our community. The mission of Exchange Club is to inspire communities to become better places to live. The group focuses on child abuse prevention, community involvement, and youth awards.

### ***Reporting Abuse***

While we hope cases of abuse and neglect can be avoided altogether, Benefis reports all suspected cases of abuse and/or neglect. In our new emergency department, we also developed a two-room SANE (Sexual Assault Nurse Exam) suite, with a comfortable room for interviews with victims of sexual or domestic abuse and a second room for medical exams. The isolated location enhances security and privacy for patients, increasing the likelihood of abuse reporting.

## 2020-2022 Health Improvement Plan

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Our work is not finished. As we envision a healthier 2023 in Cascade County, we have set a plan to support the Healthy Lives, Vibrant Futures coalition's goals for the next three years.

### **Priority Area One: Improve Cascade County Residents' Ability to Access Appropriate Healthcare**

- **Goal One – Improve Access to Preventative Medical Care for Cascade County Residents**
- **Goal Two – Improve Access to Dental Services for Cascade County Residents**
- **Goal Three – Improve Behavioral Healthcare for Cascade County Residents**

As the largest provider of healthcare in Cascade County, Benefis plays a key role in improving access to medical services for area residents. Keeping in mind the goals outlined by the Cascade County CHIP, the following section outlines our plans for the next three years to improve access.

#### ***Streamlining Pre-Access***

If patients cannot reach us when they need to schedule appointments, or if they cannot get authorization from their insurance companies for their visits, our services become inaccessible to them. To address this, we have developed a robust plan to resolve the issues patients have in getting ahold of us for their scheduling-related needs. This plan includes the development of a comprehensive pre-access center, which will serve as a high-functioning unit with a dedicated, well-trained team. The center will be supported with integrated systems and processes that facilitate scheduling and financially clearing patient services in a consistent manner. The center will not only improve the scheduling and pre-authorization process for patients, but also for referring providers.

In addition to improving scheduling, we also aim to improve our pre-procedure preparation protocols for patients. Right now, patients sometimes arrive for surgery only to have it canceled because they don't meet the requirements for the procedure. As a result, we are establishing a Pre-Surgical Optimization Clinic to ensure that high-risk patients are as healthy as possible and fully prepared for scheduled surgeries.

#### ***Focusing on Affordability***

While affordability has already been a major focus for our organization, we intend to approach this issue as an even greater priority going forward as lack of healthcare affordability continues to plague patients across the nation and in our region.

### ***Training our Future Workforce***

Up to this point, Benefis has accommodated a small number (up to eight) of third- and fourth-year medical students for rotations on our campus. Beginning in 2020, we intend to increase that number to 22 or more students per year. Additionally, we continue to explore ways in which to increase our involvement with medical residents, potentially through the establishment of a Benefis-based residency program.

### ***Facilitating Care Convenience***

In 2020, Benefis intends to launch a virtual urgent care solution, making urgent care services available to the community 24 hours per day, seven days per week. This smartphone application-based tool will offer patients a highly convenient way to access care when they need it.

Additionally, in May of 2020, Benefis plans to break ground on a new women's and children's center, which will transform the way women and children in our community access their primary and preventative healthcare providers. The new 48,000 square-foot center will bring together services currently located across a variety of buildings and campuses to offer moms with children greater convenience when seeking our services.

### ***Improving Behavioral Healthcare***

As Benefis plans for the future, behavioral health services are at the forefront. The new Benefis Women's and Children's Center will feature expanded pediatric behavioral health spaces, transforming our currently fragmented pediatric psychiatry and pediatric neuropsychology services into a comprehensive program poised for long-term growth. Benefis is also working on plans to remodel areas of our West Campus for better facilitation of our behavioral health services based at that location.

We will continue to be a leader in efforts to improve access to behavioral health services and support activities done in partnership with other community groups. One such activity that has already been identified is the development of a crisis care referral tool that can be used community wide.

### ***Defining Care Coordination***

Benefis recently created a patient navigation committee composed of all the transition planners, discharge planners, case managers, and care coordinators throughout our system. The goal of the committee is to improve communication and collaboration across the various entities, while establishing standardized practices for discharge planning and patient navigation throughout the organization. Ultimately, this will improve awareness and understanding of role expectations for patients and their families throughout our care continuum.

### ***Continuing Our Regional Focus***

In addition to expanding our regional clinics in the coming years and utilizing grant funds to upgrade our regional telemedicine infrastructure, in 2020 Benefis plans to add a critical care ground transport service, which will take pressure off of rural, volunteer paramedics in transferring patients back and forth between Benefis and their communities.

### ***Building Our Screening Programs***

One thing we continue to work on is promoting and encouraging screenings so that patients access care at appropriate junctures, before it's too late. Going forward, we will continue to refine our programs to track various screenings, working to understand and target gaps in screenings – tests that can save lives.

## **Priority Area Two: Reduce Substance Misuse, Including Alcohol, Tobacco, and Legal/Illegal Drugs**

- **Goal One – Maintain Coalition Capacity and Core Competency**
- **Goal Two – Reduce Substance Abuse Among Middle and High School-Aged Youth**
- **Goal Three – Reduce Substance Use Disorders in Cascade County**

Throughout the next few years, we intend to continue and improve our substance interventions, including the following:

- Tobacco is a significant risk factor for multiple cancers. With that in mind, Benefis providers will continue to screen patients for tobacco use at wellness visits and aid with cessation intervention.
- Our pediatric providers will continue to screen and counsel adolescents against drug, alcohol, and other forms of substance abuse.
- Benefis will develop a hospital opioid stewardship program, with the goal of curbing the increasing trend of opioid misuse beginning in the inpatient setting. This project aims to improve in-house processes so that patients who are prescribed opioids as inpatients do not run the risk of becoming addicted to the medications post-discharge, thus reducing the burden of the opioid epidemic in our community.
- Benefis representatives will continue their involvement with the local Substance Abuse Prevention Alliance.



### **Priority Area Three: Increase the Percentage of Cascade County Residents at a Healthy Weight**

- **Goal One – Get Fit Great Falls Will Improve Organizational Infrastructure and Sustainability**
- **Goal Two – Get Fit Great Falls Will Lead and Support Efforts to Build an Active Community**
- **Goal Three – Get Fit Great Falls Will Increase Vegetable Intake Among Great Falls Residents**

Knowing that obesity is linked to diabetes, stroke, cancer, and many other health conditions, Benefis will continue important healthy lifestyle programs and pursue services that promote nutrition and fitness. Get Fit Great Falls is leading the CHIP efforts in the next three years, and Benefis will continue to support the program.

### **Priority Area Four: Decrease the Number of Child Abuse and Neglect Cases in Cascade County**

- **Goal One – Expand Community Outreach and Education on Child Abuse and Neglect**
- **Goal Two – Equip New Families and Obstetric/Pediatric Providers with Prevention Tools**
- **Goal Three – Prevent Repetition of Child Abuse and Neglect**

Great Falls has serious child abuse and neglect issues. Benefis is prepared to support community efforts to implement new strategies to improve family dynamics. We take the safety and health of all our patients very seriously and will continue to follow mandatory reporting guidelines for cases of suspected abuse and neglect. Additionally, we will take part in Cascade County's effort to establish a standardized referral process for home visiting programs.

As we establish our new women's and children's center, our providers will have a greater opportunity to collaborate with one another, taking a multidisciplinary approach to helping patients and families address complex issues that can lead to abuse.

## Conclusion

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Benefis Health System is committed to supporting continuous health improvement in our community. We will work closely with the Cascade County Healthy Lives, Vibrant Futures coalition on all four health priority areas outlined in this report.

We look forward to collaborating with our many community partners to truly make a difference in the lives of our community over the next three years and beyond.

We measure each step forward using statistics, but we pursue these goals because behind those numbers we see the child safe in his home, the woman who lives long enough to see her grandchildren grow up, and the man who turns his life around with addiction treatment.

We pursue these goals because we know that behind every statistic is a story.