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## The Health Center increases access to health care — one school at a time

Loryn Kykendall Walla Walla Union-Bulletin  
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1 of 3

The Health Center therapist Delia Gutierrez holds open the door to her office at Garrison Middle School on Thursday, .  
Kezia Setyawan, Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

More than 15 years ago, a small organization was formed to address the growing need for mental health services at Lincoln High School in Walla Walla.

Today, that organization operates in every middle and high school in Walla Walla School District.

The Health Center, founded in 2008, has grown right along with the demand for mental health care and basic medical services. It is now under the leadership of Executive Director Norma Hernández, who said the organization continues to provide a trusted and supportive space for students who often feel unsafe or unseen elsewhere.

“We meet students exactly where they are — physically in their schools and emotionally in their lived realities,” Hernández said. “We are shifting our service focus to prioritize the needs of those most affected by systemic harm and work alongside them to access resources, advocate for change, and navigate systems designed to exclude them.”



The Health Center provides both mental and medical services to students, free of charge. Licensed mental health therapists offer individual, family and group therapy. Being on-site means students’ out-of-class time is reduced. During the 2024-2025 school year, 94% of students were able to return right back to class after their visit to The Health Center.

The Health Center opened its most recent clinic at Garrison Middle School in late 2023. In the short time it has been operating, the demand for services has grown rapidly. The average number of students receiving mental health services every month more than doubled from 20 to 43 in the first year.

Garrison therapist Delia Gutierrez said it took students a little while to understand what The Health Center does and what they could go there for, but that has all changed in a short time.

"They just feel so comfortable coming here," Gutierrez said. "There are students that are struggling with social connections and sometimes they need to have some space for themselves. So there's some students that just go grab their lunch and then come here."

Gutierrez said she's had many eighth graders who have gone on to one of the high schools and continued to use The Health Center at their new school as well.

"What I've heard from a few students is they really like every time they learn something new, and coping skills that they can use to be successful in different areas," Gutierrez said.

Similarly, at Walla Walla High School, therapist Sarah Knapp's office serves as a general safe space for anyone who needs it.

"I have students that I'm seeing either weekly or every other week doing therapy, but sometimes I'm also just meeting with students that are having a hard time," Knapp said.

There is an ever-growing need for services that The Health Center provides, with more and more students visiting the clinics each year.



The Health Center therapist Sarah Knapp sits in one of the therapy chairs in her office at Walla Walla High School.

Kezia Setyawan, Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

At Garrison, demand has increased so much that Gutierrez said another therapist was hired last year.

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"The first year, we had a wait list," Gutierrez said. "There was a huge need from the beginning, so just having an addition this year was so helpful. And I think there's still a need for another one."

But it's not just because The Health Center is new to Garrison. Walla Walla High School, where The Health Center opened a clinic in 2017, still faces a growing demand for services.

Knapp said her team added a couple of student interns in the past two years just because of the need.

"Now, we have students that will come in and say, 'My friend told me that you guys were awesome, and I should come talk to you,'" Knapp said. "There's still stigma around mental health sometimes, so that's one of the things that's really cool — to see kids referring their friends. It says we are making an impact, and students are finding value in us."



Fidget toys and scratch pads that students can use during their therapy sessions in Sarah Knapp's office.

Kezia Setyawan, Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

But funding is the major roadblock to further expansion — not just at Garrison or Wa-Hi, but for The Health Center as a whole. As an independent nonprofit, the organization needs to constantly fundraise to keep operating. Hernández said she would love to expand into elementary schools and schools outside Walla Walla, but the funding isn't there right now.

"Sadly, due to changes in federal health care funding, we do not anticipate having the financial support needed to expand," Hernández said. "It takes approximately \$175,000 annually per clinic location."

Despite the current challenges with growth beyond this point, The Health Center has been, and continues to be, a model for others like it. When it first opened, Hernández said, there were only a few other school-based clinics in Washington, but they were all sponsored by health care agencies and funded by those organizations.

And while there are now more than 70 school-based clinics in Washington, The Health Center remains the only one of its kind.

Eastern Washington has only 10 clinics, operated by four agencies. The Health Center operates four of those. It is still the only independent 501(c)3 in the state.

“As you can see, when I say we are unique, we are truly unique,” Hernández said. “Because of this, The Health Center is a model that is studied nationally.”

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### **How to donate**

Donations can be made to The Health Center online at [tinyurl.com/4jp9z6hv](https://tinyurl.com/4jp9z6hv) for any amount, with the option to make it a monthly donation.

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