

# Whatcom County Justice Project

## Findings from Focus Groups & Survey

May 2023



## Disclaimer

This report presents research conducted by Crossroads Consulting to gather input on potential projects for the Justice Project Implementation Plan.

Recruitment of participants prioritized people from communities that have been under-represented in the Justice Project, and whose input is essential (people with lived experience in the criminal legal system, Black, Indigenous, Latinx/Hispanic, and other people of color). People chose to participate in a focus group and survey and were paid for their time (a self-selected, non-random sample).

Focus groups are a type of qualitative research to assess the perspectives and feelings of the people who participated at a point in time. The survey questions were similarly designed to gather peoples' opinions using a quantitative and open-ended written format.

The analysis presented here attempts to fairly and accurately reflect people's viewpoints and does not necessarily reflect objective facts.

# The Justice Project

The Justice Project is Whatcom County's effort to address public health, safety, and justice issues in a comprehensive way with a lot of input from the community and people working in the criminal legal system.

Focus Group and Survey Input were collected to help inform the **Implementation Plan** for the steps to take in the next 1-3 years



Needs Assessment

**Implementation Plan**

County Council

# Focus groups April 24- May 3<sup>rd</sup>

## Whatcom County Needs Your Voice! Justice Project Implementation Plan

### PARTICIPATE IN A FOCUS GROUP! APRIL 24–28, 2023

Focus groups will discuss ways to improve services for people involved with the criminal legal system, including the jail.

Seeking focus group participants who identify as follows:

- Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC)
- Lummi Nation or Nooksack Tribe
- Lived experience in the criminal legal [system](#)
- Immigrant
- Latino/Latina/[Latine](#)

Focus groups will be 90 minutes, online or in-person, and participants will be asked to review material in advance of the meeting. Participants will be paid **\$100**.

To participate, **fill out a brief survey** about your availability. Scan the QR code below or visit:  
[www.surveymonkey.com/r/13VD3WD](http://www.surveymonkey.com/r/13VD3WD)



For more information on the Justice Project, please visit [www.whatcomcounty.us/justice](http://www.whatcomcounty.us/justice)

## Involving community members identifying as:

- BIPOC
- Nooksack/Lummi Members
- Latinx/Hispanic
- People with lived experience in the criminal legal system and their families

## Methods of outreach:

- Emails & calls to individuals and groups
- Facebook posts
- Flyers in English and Spanish

# Process

- 7 focus groups – all Whatcom County residents
- 6 groups in-person, 1 via Zoom
- 90-minute confidential sessions
- Participants also filled out a survey to supplement the discussion
- People were compensated for their time

# Who was involved?

Focus Groups	# Participants
Lived experience in criminal legal system (personal or friend/family)	26 (in 2 groups)
Lummi Nation	9
BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color)	8 (met twice)
Latinx/Hispanic	9
Other – Mostly service providers	8
Key Informant Interview	# Participants
Nooksack Tribal Police Chief & Deputy	2
Surveys	# Participants
Focus group participants	60
Survey-only participants	14

# Questions for the focus groups & survey

## People were asked...

- Which of the Proposed Projects seem like they will make the biggest difference and why?
- Where should the jail and other facilities be located?
- How can we ensure that the systems, facilities, and services really meet the needs of people in your community?

# Potential Implementation Planning Projects

17 specific action  
items in  
6 categories

**Increase Access to Behavioral Health Services**

**Bolster Re-entry Support Services**

**Make Systems Changes with Local, Regional, & State  
Partners**

**Expand Supportive Housing for People At Risk of  
Incarceration**

**Build a Safe & Humane Jail and Behavioral Health Facilities  
with Services to Help People Stay Out of Jail**

**Measure and Share Progress for Accountability and  
Transparency**

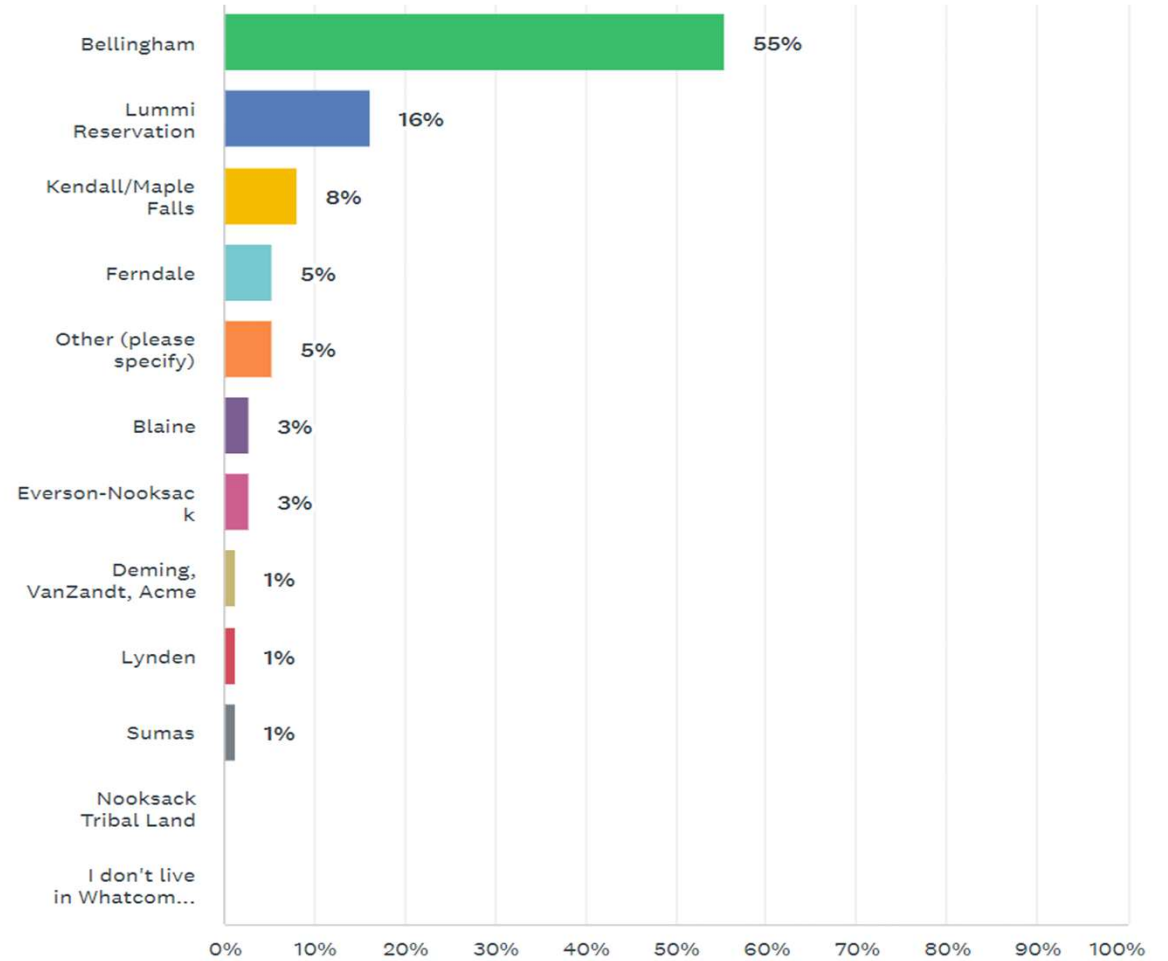


# About the Respondents

# Geographic Distribution

## Where in Whatcom County do you live?

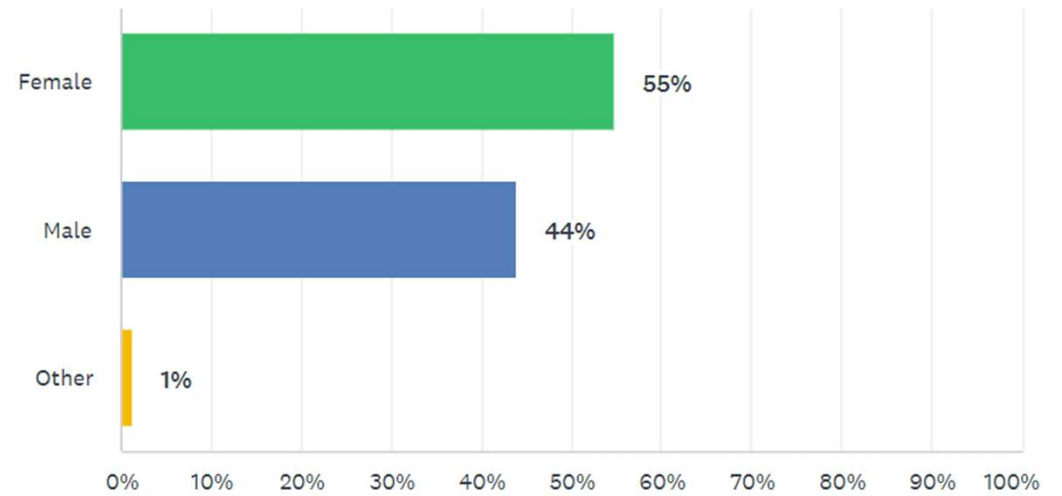
Answered: 74 Skipped: 0



# Gender Identity

What is your gender identity?

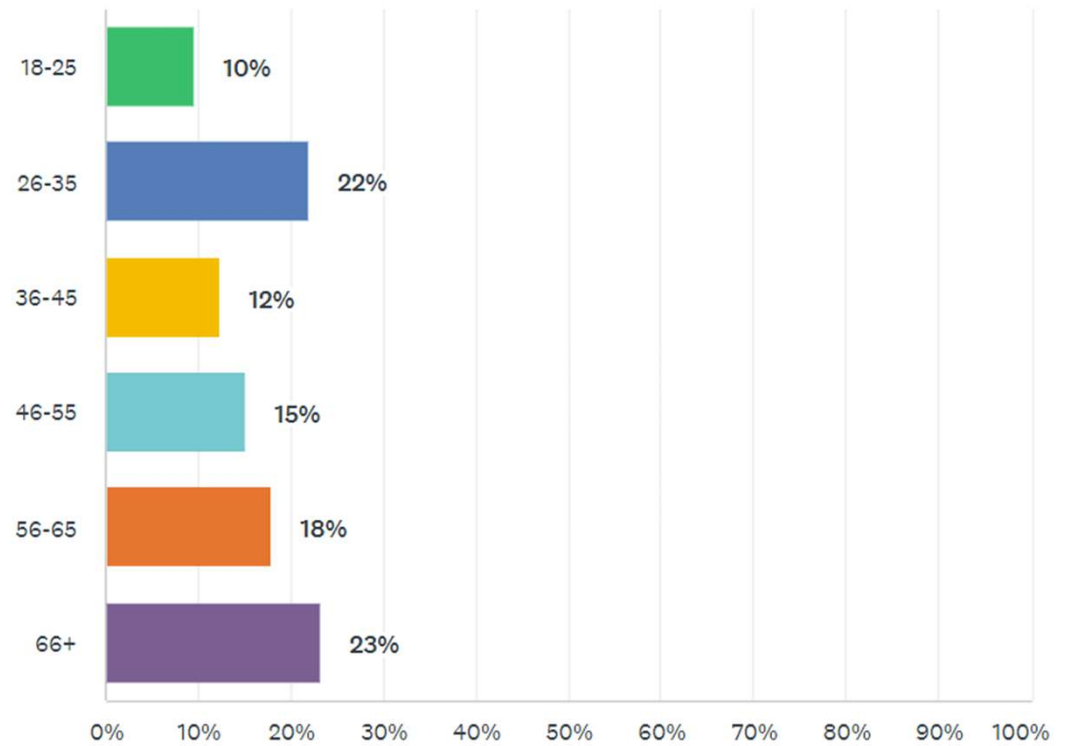
Answered: 73 Skipped: 1



# Age Range

## Your age range

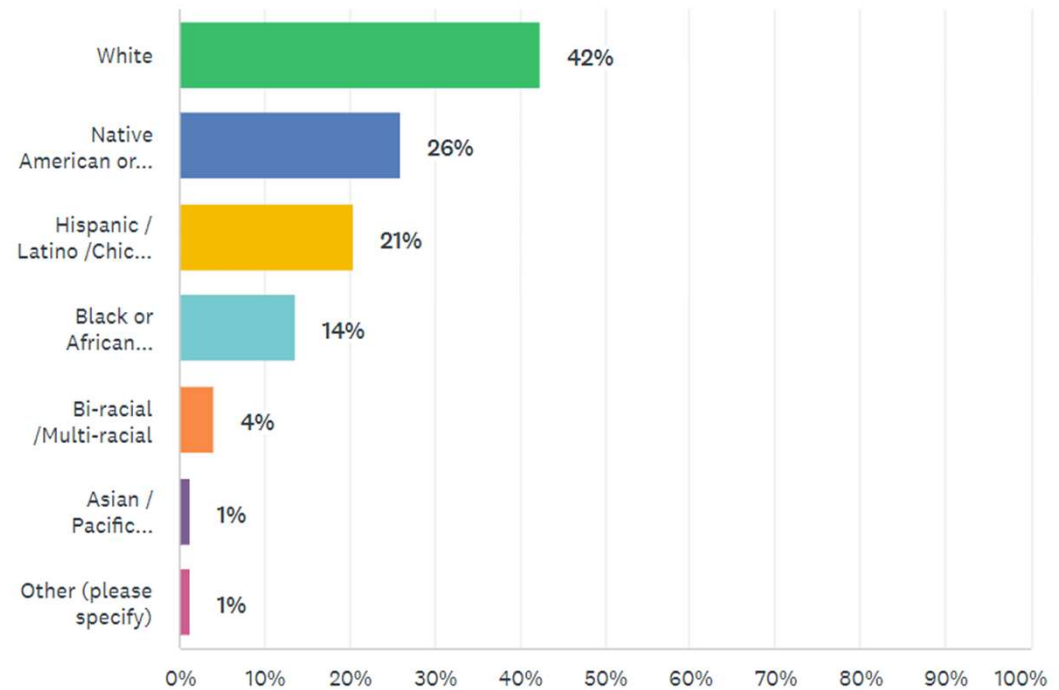
Answered: 73 Skipped: 1



# Race / Ethnicity

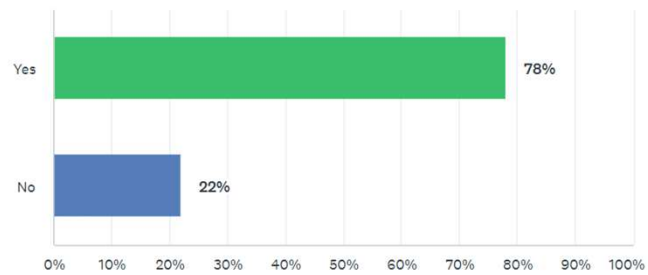
How would you describe your race/ethnicity? (check all that apply)

Answered: 73 Skipped: 1



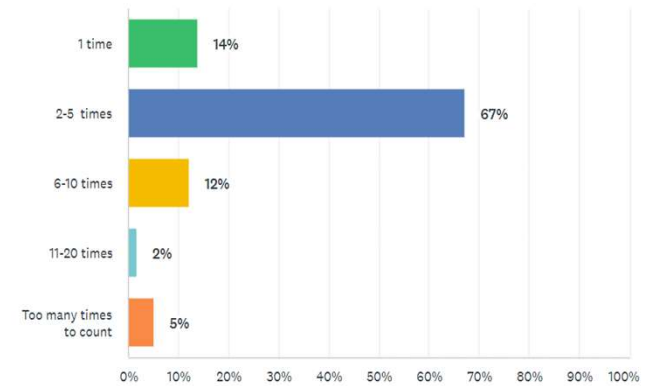
## Have you ever been a victim of a crime?

Answered: 73 Skipped: 1



## If yes, about how many times have you been a victim of crime? (if no, skip question)

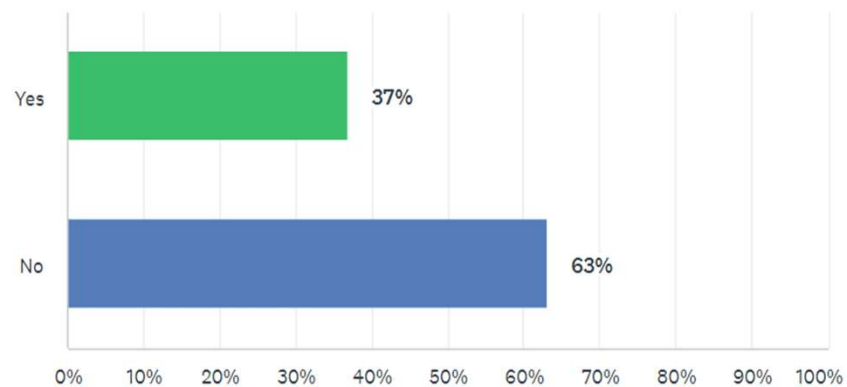
Answered: 58 Skipped: 16



# Involvement with Criminal Legal System

Have you ever worked for pay or volunteered to provide any type of support services to people who are/were involved in the criminal legal system (e.g., work in the jail, work in a social service agency, volunteer to run a recovery group)?

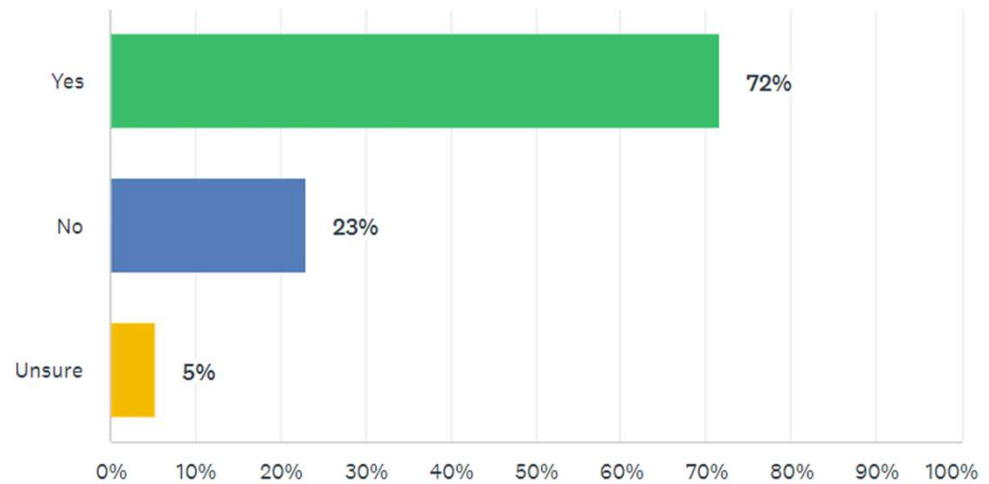
Answered: 73 Skipped: 1



# Involvement with Criminal Legal System

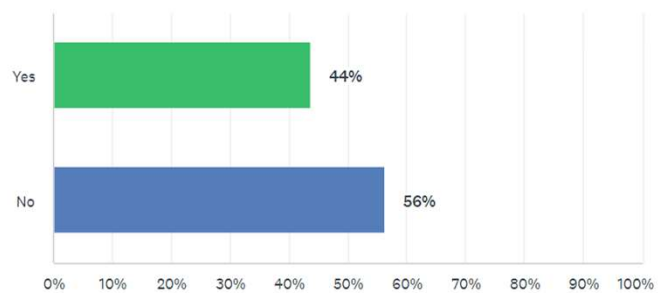
Apart from yourself, do you know people personally who have been incarcerated in the Whatcom County Jail in Bellingham?

Answered: 74 Skipped: 0



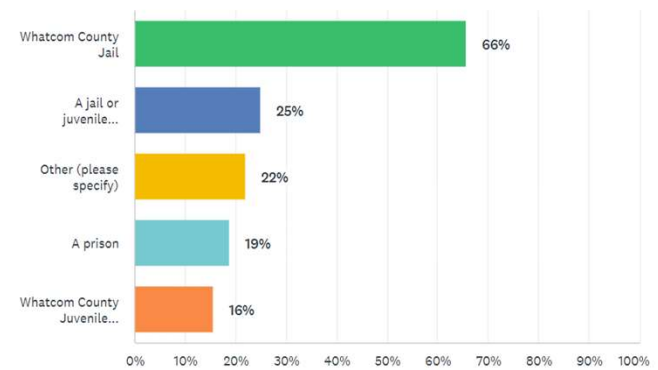
## Have you ever been incarcerated?

Answered: 71 Skipped: 3



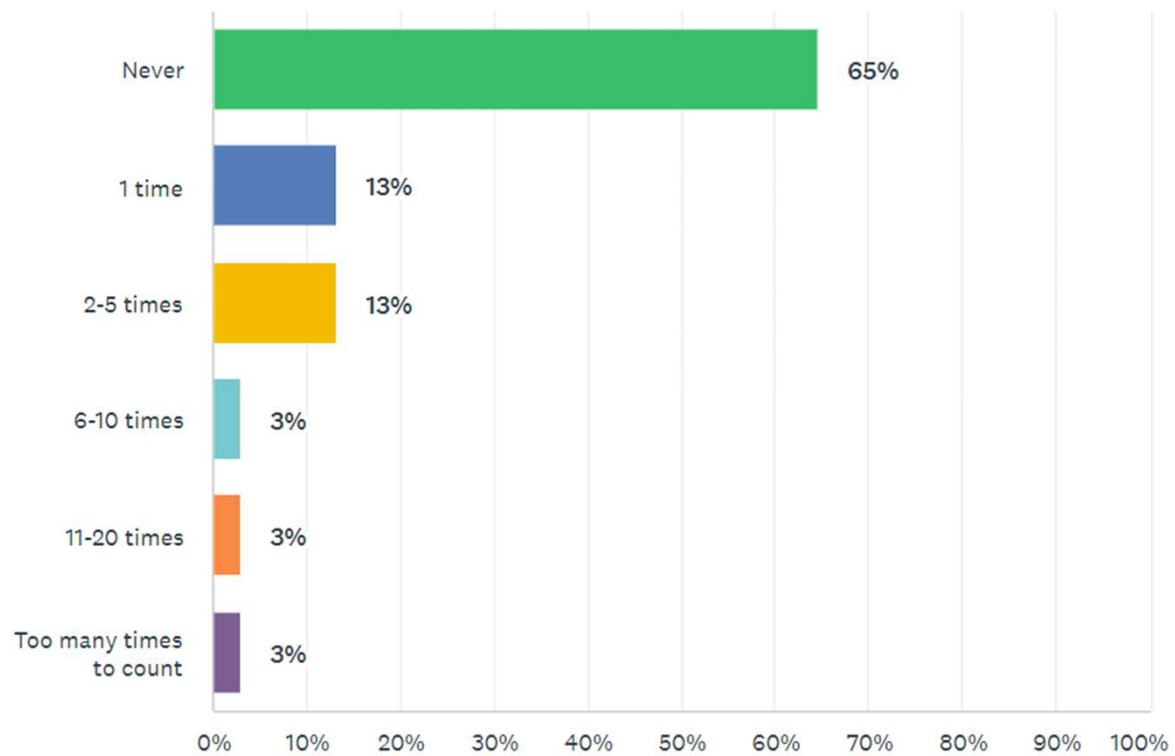
## If yes, where were you incarcerated? (check as many as apply) If no, skip question.

Answered: 32 Skipped: 42



# About how many times have you spent more than a day in Whatcom County Jail?

Answered: 68 Skipped: 6





# Survey Results Regarding Potential Implementation Projects

How important is it to take each of these actions in next 1-3 years?

- Very important
- Important
- Somewhat imp.
- Not at all imp.
- Don't know

Action	% very important / important
Ensure existing supportive housing programs are adequately staffed and equipped to serve people who are involved with the criminal legal system	96%
Address shortages of BH service providers to expand service capacity	92%
Increase communication & coordination between organizations providing services to people with BH challenges	92%
Establish jail-based and community-based locations where people can receive coordinated re-entry support services	92%
Build a Behavioral Care Center to provide secure, short-term behavioral health treatment as an alternative to jail.	92%
Research feasibility & desirability of building a secure detox facility in the region	92%

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How important is it to take each of these actions in next 1-3 years?

Continued

Action	% very important/ important
Increase capacity of existing programs to divert people from incarceration (GRACE, LEAD, etc.)	91%
Advocate for a state waiver to allow use of Medicaid funds to pay for jail-based medical & BH services	91%
Continue to make changes in court systems that reduce the # of people detained in jail before trial & provide options in lieu of bail	89%
Increase access to inpatient competency restoration services in partnership with regional organizations	88%
Expand the # of permanent supportive housing options for people who are involved w/ the criminal legal system	88%
Ensure people leaving jail have transportation to a safe destination	86%


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How important is it to take each of these actions in next 1-3 years?

Continued

Action	% very important / important
Explore and develop outpatient competency restoration services	85%
Build a 23-hour Crisis Relief Center – Open 24/7 to serve as a sobering center & address BH & physical health needs	85%
Collect data to measure progress toward desired outcomes	85%
Develop a data dashboard for criminal legal system organizations to share data with one another & the public.	82%
Build a safe & humane jail that is right-sized, well-designed, and affordable to build & operate	74%

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# Summary of Focus Group Findings

# Who is in the jail and why

- Impressions of who is in the jail strongly influence responses about what actions to take.
- People lack information about criminal charges related to incarceration.
- Perspective is that people with behavioral health issues fill the jail.
- Belief that increasing rates of drug use among youth, along with trauma and poverty, are contributing to involvement with the criminal legal system.
- Concern about the high percentage of people in jail pre-trial.

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Top priority  
across all  
groups:

## Behavioral Health (BH) Services & Facilities

- People see a need for more BH services and facilities of all types
  - Detox facilities
  - Long-term treatment for substance use disorders
  - Supportive, drug-free, housing for people with BH issues
  - On-going case management
  - Peer support
- Concern about prevalence of substance use disorder and addicts cycling through services without long-term recovery.
- Increase diversion options (in lieu of bail) and increase capacity of diversion programs.
- Address BH workforce shortages.
- Increase communication & coordination between providers.

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## Input on Other Potential Implementation Projects

- Strong support for re-entry and supportive housing services.
- Concerns about competency restoration and medication management in the jail.
  - Competency restoration is a complicated and problematic process for people to understand.
- Data collection and dashboard
  - Many value data and want it to guide program development.
  - Others distrust data, especially government-related.
  - Encouraged collaboration with academic institutions and statewide/national efforts.

## Diversity of opinions about the jail

- Most feel that the jail should be a rehabilitative environment.
- A few people feel that a jail (or *any* involuntary facility) is ultimately not the answer.
- Concern that Whatcom County Jail is a traumatic place to be.

*"It's horribly grim... I think it's psychologically traumatizing and damaging to be especially in that jail. I have actually seen people deteriorate horribly while they are waiting for their trial."*

## Diversity of opinions about the jail

- Acknowledgement that the jail is in bad shape.
- Perceived trade-off between BH services/facilities and a new jail.
- Preference is for BH services/facilities

*"If it were just a choice between jail and behavioral services, rehabilitation services, all of those kinds of things, I'm definitely voting for the behavioral rehabilitation services. I mean, I get it that the building is crumbling. It's not good. I would like to have both, but if I can only have one, I'm having the behavioral services."*

## Diversity of opinions about the jail

- Most believe a jail replacement should be relatively small.

*"I think we should build a small jail because I think most people don't belong there. They belong in other settings, in other systems."*

- Concern that a bigger facility will lead to more people being incarcerated: "if they build it, they will fill it."
- Many like idea of co-locating services (i.e., campus concept) so people can smoothly go from one service to another in a continuum of care.

# Mixed Opinions about Locating a New Jail and Other Facilities

- Most like the idea of Behavioral Care Center co-located with the jail and favored expenditures here.
- Some like idea of jail-based services, others feel BH services should be community-based.
- Horizontal design generally preferred, however for people who strongly prefer Irongate or Civic Center, design was less important.
- Proximity to Ferndale and Lummi Nation land a concern for some, if facilities are built at LaBounty.
- Proximity to courthouse and other community resources was important, so transportation from Irongate or LaBounty will be essential if facilities are placed in either of these locations.

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# Transparency Accountability Inclusion

- People questioned likelihood of meaningful change and how their input would matter.
- People expressed enthusiasm for ongoing communication and participation in the Justice Project.
- People want to know how diverse communities and those with lived experience will be involved in planning and monitoring progress moving forward.

*"Shout out to whoever made sure we got paid... A lot of times I get invited (I'm sure we all get invited) to these predominately white spaces to be traumatized for free."*

Helpful  
information  
to provide  
the  
community

- Information about **who** is in the jail and **why** people are in the jail.
- Information of where money was spent from 2004 tax measure.
- Cost estimates for new facilities in different locations.
- Criteria for a right-sized jail.

Questions?

## Implementation Planning Process Next Steps

- Revise Implementation Plan projects based on focus group & survey input.
- Check-in May 15 and poll IPRTF for feedback.
- County Council discussion, May 23.
- Town Hall, May 24 – gather public input.
- Draft Implementation Plan.
- Plan to IPRTF & Council for review.
- Final Implementation Plan to Council end of June.