



2023



WHATCOM COUNTY
**HEALTH AND
COMMUNITY
SERVICES**



Annual Report

A Letter From The Director



We live in a different world than five years ago. While many of the most significant impacts of COVID-19 are behind us, new threats to our health and community have emerged, or become more pronounced. Fentanyl has devastated families, and in Whatcom County, there has been a nearly 50% increase in overdose deaths from 2022 to 2023. Mental illness, while a long-term priority, has now reached a crisis level for families, schools and our young people. Key drivers of homelessness - affordability and accessibility - are worse, while services for the chronically homeless are not keeping pace with the growing numbers of people living unsheltered. Access to affordable childcare, food, and other basic needs has declined due to inflation and other economic drivers. The increase in severe weather events and temperatures we're experiencing are impacting our homes and way of life.

Life has changed for you in these last five years — and it's changed for us, as well. Our department, which serves every geographic corner of the county in cities and unincorporated communities alike, is a different organization in so many ways. Coming out of the COVID-19 crisis response, we have been able to utilize our growing number of staff to expand public health work in our County. Two years ago, we created the Response Systems Division, which brought our crisis outreach and intensive case management programs in-house. Last year, we launched our new five-year strategic plan and changed our name to Whatcom County Health and Community Services. Nearly half of our staff now work in human services or behavioral health, and this change honors the complexity and diversity of our work and commitment to our community. Through state and federal grants, we've expanded programs in nearly every division in our department. We're implementing the goals of the Healthy Children's Fund, passed in 2022, and beginning work on designing the behavioral health components of the Public Health, Safety, and Justice ballot measure passed in 2023. While our team, and budget, are nearly double what they were just five years ago, only 6% of our revenue comes from the county's general fund. We are proud to have built programs and services that have gained the trust and financial commitment of outside funders.

Today, the public health system is more visible than it has ever been before. We recognize that for some in our community, it may be hard to trust government agencies due to both historical traumas and recent challenges. The best way that we can grow that trust is to earn it. We intend to do that every day by providing timely services with the customer service you expect, while tackling the important issues that matter to Whatcom County. If we have learned anything in the last several years, it's that nothing important can be accomplished without the support and collaboration of our partners and our community. I invite you to move forward with us into a new era for Whatcom County Health and Community Services. We look forward to working with you, and for you.

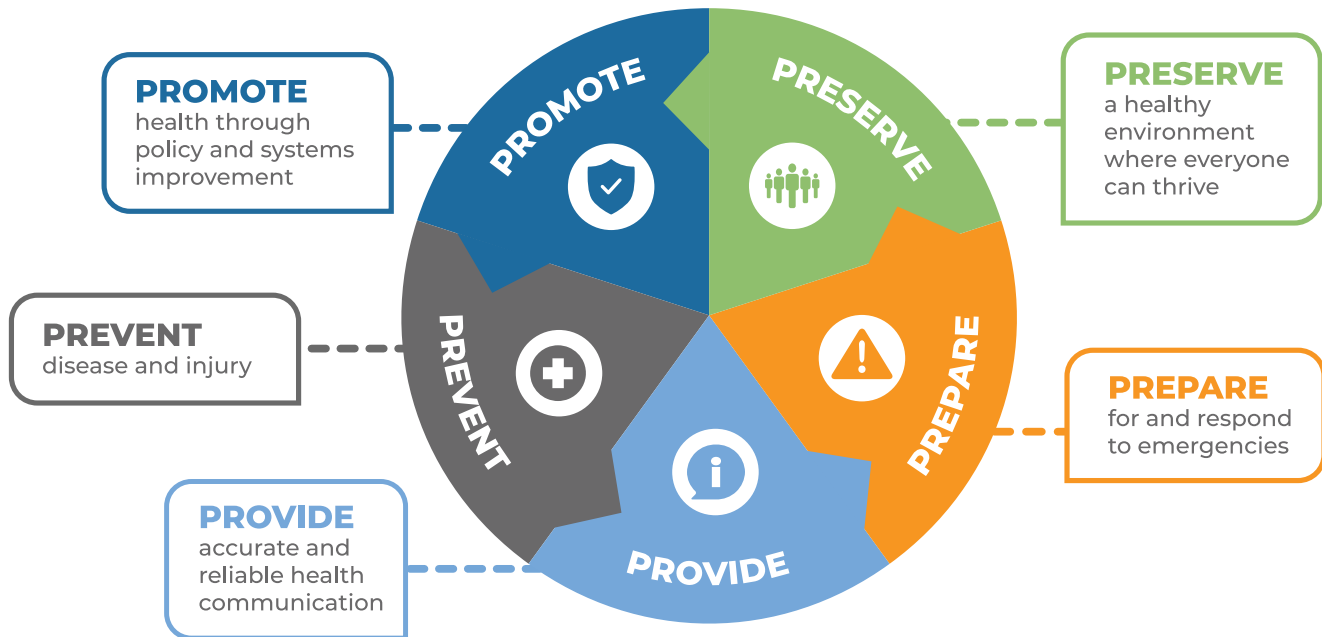
In Community,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Erika Lautenbach". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Erika Lautenbach, MPH
Director, Whatcom County Health and Community Services

► Purpose, Priorities, Values

OUR PURPOSE: We serve Whatcom County by **ADVANCING EQUITY** & **PARTNERING WITH OUR COMMUNITY** to:



OUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES:

These four strategic priorities will strengthen Whatcom County Health Department's capacity to fulfill its purpose and positively impact Whatcom County's community health programs, services and systems.

| | | | |
|--|--|---|--|
| Community Partnerships & Engagement Partner collaboratively to find community-based solutions that advance health and health equity. | Organizational Infrastructure Effectively manage finances, resources, and staffing to support a culture of ethical practice, decision-making and governance. | Workforce Development Build and support a diverse, skilled health and human services workforce while ensuring an organizational culture and work environment that is supportive of staff. | Quality Management Use program data to drive decision-making, inform ongoing improvements and foster a culture of transparency and accountability. |
|--|--|---|--|

OUR VALUES:

Equity • Collaboration • Compassion • Transparency • Innovation • Service

► What We Do

The Communicable Disease and Epidemiology division works to stop the spread of disease. They work to prevent and investigate infectious diseases, provide screenings and clinical/community support referrals, and provide vaccinations and harm reduction services. They work to prevent and control the spread of communicable diseases like tuberculosis, measles, COVID-19, RSV, influenza, hepatitis C, HIV, syphilis, MRSA, and many more.

Programs include:

- Immunizations
- Tuberculosis
- Syringe Services Program
- Communicable Disease
- Sexual Health



The Community and Organizational Development division provides services that cross-cut and connect all divisions within the department. They help the department to carry out its priorities and projects more effectively and implement WCHCS's 2023-2027 Strategic Plan.

Programs include:

- Health Information & Assessment
 - Epidemiology
 - Assessment & Evaluation
 - Data & Informatics
- Partnerships & Strategy
 - Communications
 - Emergency Preparedness & Resiliency
 - Equity
 - Policy
- Workforce Development



The Community Health & Human Services division promotes health and well-being for everyone in our community. They aim to reduce health disparities and encourage healthy behaviors. They offer services in areas such as housing, food and nutrition, and substance use prevention, as well as support for children and families, veterans, and people with disabilities.

Programs include:

- Nurse-Family Partnership
- Food Systems
- Homeless Housing
- Developmental Disabilities
- Veterans
- Substance use prevention
- Children with Special Health Care Needs
- Childcare and Early Learning
- LatinX Outreach



The Environmental Health division works to promote a healthy and safe environment. They focus on disease and injury prevention and adherence to environmental health mandates and requirements. They monitor drinking and recreational water quality; conduct restaurant inspections and monitor food recalls in order to prevent foodborne illnesses; prevent exposure to hazards like lead, asbestos, or mold in homes or school environments, and much more.

Programs include:

- Solid Waste
- Food Safety
- School Health & Safety
- Living Environment
- On-site Septic
- Drinking Water
- Climate Change Response



The Financial and Administrative Services division makes sure services run smoothly. They provide customer service to community members in accessing information and resources. They manage vital records like birth and death certificates, permits, and other health-related public records. They also oversee the department budget, grants and contracts, and financial services.

Programs include:

- Community customer services including vital records, permitting, and complaints
- Financial Services and Contracts
- Internal administrative services



The Response Systems division provides intensive case management services to vulnerable community members. They work closely with first responders, healthcare providers, social services, and the legal system to coordinate services for their clients and reduce utilization of emergency services and incarceration.

Programs include:

- Ground-Level Response and Coordinated Engagement (GRACE)
- Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD)
- Alternative Response Team (ART)
- Mental Health Court
- Co-Responder program with Behavioral Health Sheriff Deputies
- Behavioral health contracts and coordination



▶ 2023 Highlights

Behavioral Health Funds Improve Outcomes for Our Kids

All seven school districts in Whatcom County provided behavioral health services in the previous and current school years using Behavioral Health Funds administered through our department. All Whatcom County kids benefit from this, with 57% of people served outside Bellingham.

The funds go towards substance use prevention professionals and programs, mental and behavioral health practitioners, coordination of community services, and outreach.

Reducing risk in these areas also impacts other 'life indicators,' such as improving school performance and a child's interactions with family and community.

These services demonstrate:

- Cost savings to the community.
- Improved behavioral health outcomes.
- Referrals and connections to treatment for mental health, substance use, or both.
- Leveraged resources.

Cost-benefit estimates show that effective school-based programs can save \$18 for every \$1 spent.



Wiser Lake: Our year-long data collection effort will help understand & mitigate harmful algae blooms.

Improving the Health of Wiser Lake

For the last two years we've been studying the consistent presence of harmful algae blooms (HABs) at Wiser Lake. Through a grant from the Washington State Department of Health, we worked with local groups to collect 12 months of data - the first step in discovering the cause of HABs.

An additional grant from the Department of Ecology will start in July and fund analysis of the data we are currently collecting. Then, we can develop a set of recommendations based on the results.

For updates on this project, or to sign up for notifications via email or text, visit <https://www.whatcomcounty.us/wiser>.

Whatcom County Made Historic Childcare Investments

Last May, Whatcom County awarded \$5.8 million in federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding to create 277 new early learning slots and preserve 84 existing slots, including investments in Ferndale, Bellingham, and the Meridian School District. Awardees include:

- Whatcom Family YMCA Barkley
- Western Washington University's Child Development Center
- Opportunity Council Bellis Project
- Gabriel's Art Kids, Ferndale
- Meridian School District

The County also awarded a \$750,000 grant to the Boys and Girls Clubs of Whatcom County to mitigate financial impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic after its March 2020 acquisition of Kids' World.

In addition, with ARPA funding from Whatcom County and the City of Bellingham, Opportunity Council's Center for Retention and Expansion of Childcare (C-RECC) has awarded grants to over 32 local childcare providers, ranging from \$10,000 to \$100,000 per provider. With these grants, providers have been able to raise wages, meet urgent maintenance needs, purchase supplies, and create enriched early learning environments with high-quality curriculum and services.

Further funding from Whatcom County has supported emergency childcare vouchers for families, business leadership and technical assistance, and professional development scholarships for childcare workers.

Innovative New Program Provides Alternative to Law Enforcement for 911 Calls

Last year WCHCS launched Whatcom County's Alternative Response Team (ART), a program that sends behavioral health specialists to respond to specific non-violent behavioral health 911 calls in Bellingham, instead of law enforcement.

ART works to de-escalate tense situations and engage someone experiencing a behavioral health crisis. Feedback from law enforcement and other community partners is that most ART calls have been resolved without additional backup from law enforcement, and thus freeing up Bellingham Police Officers

to respond to the most serious 911 calls. From July through December 2023, 830 calls to 911 were dispatched directly to ART. Less than one percent of those calls needed to be referred to law enforcement for back-up support.

For more information, visit the ART webpage at <https://www.whatcomcounty.us/RSD>.

Taking Action to Address the Opioid Crisis in Our Community

Responding to the opioid crisis in our community continues to be a WCHCS top priority. Every division at WCHCS is working to address the opioid crisis by supporting children, youth, and families facing addiction; preventing overdose deaths by distributing Naloxone and training community members on how to use it; working on the street directly with clients with addiction issues to connect them to housing, medical care, and other essential services; operating the Syringe Services Program; providing training and education regarding fentanyl and other opioids; working to increase access to treatment and recovery options; advocating for system-wide improvements; and leading county-wide prevention coalitions.

In June, the department launched the website whatcomoverdoseprevention.org, where individuals and groups can request free Naloxone kits and find information, resources, and up-to-date local data on the opioid crisis. In August, WCHCS formed the County-wide Multi-Agency Coordination (MAC) Group formed to coordinate response efforts. The MAC group is made up of 70+ organizations and agencies focused on substance use disorder prevention, treatment, intervention, and recovery; members include leaders in healthcare, social services, housing, law enforcement, courts, EMS, libraries, schools, and tribal health.



(Left to Right) WCHCS Co-Health Officer Dr. Greg Thompson, Whatcom County EMS Specialist Steven Cohen and WCHCS Supervisor Lela Riherd providing information and training at a Sehome High School community event.

2023 By The Numbers:



Communicable Disease & Epidemiology

- 134 vaccine outreach events were held - served over 500 clients; more than 1,000 vaccines were administered
- 300 scheduled clinical visits completed
- Provided approximately 125 syringe services program/harm reduction clinics and trainings for community partners

▶ 2023 Partnership Highlights

Partnership With Ferndale Community Services Supports County Severe Weather Shelter



Ferndale
Community
Services

Serving North Whatcom County

WCHCS manages the county's contract to provide up to \$75,450 to Ferndale Community Services, funded by the federal American Rescue Plan Act. This local nonprofit operates the only Whatcom County shelter outside the city limits of Bellingham. The group's typical service area includes Ferndale, Custer, Blaine, Birch Bay, Lynden, and the surrounding unincorporated county areas. This shelter can accept up to 15 guests and provides shower and laundry facilities, along with a warm place to sleep during extremely cold weather.

In addition to the severe weather shelter, Ferndale Community Services provides year-round support to community members in need through:

- A Community Resource Center with clothing and household items
- The Other Bank providing hygiene supplies
- The Utility Fund for help with City of Ferndale water and sewer bills
- Computer and phone usage
- Housing and job search assistance
- Transportation services
- Shower and laundry referrals

Learn more at <https://ferndalecs.org/>

Partnership with Local Veterans Clinic Enhances, Expands Veterans Services



WCHCS has supported military veterans in Whatcom County with resource referrals and financial assistance for over a decade with a single staff member. In 2023, the department added a second veterans specialist position whose office is located at the Bellingham's Vet Center.

The Bellingham Vet Center is a one-stop-shop for qualifying veterans seeking mental health counseling, veteran resources, and disability benefits/claims processing. Having county staff co-located in the same building has strengthened the partnership with Bellingham-based VA employees, maintained open communication with other veteran service providers, and increased collaboration with outreach opportunities, in order to better support veterans in our community. Many Whatcom County vets served in Vietnam, and many live in rural parts of the County with limited transportation options. Having two locations where they can get services (as well as the ability to connect over email, phone, or text) has helped make services much more accessible. In 2023, WCHCS staff submitted 1,132 claims on behalf of Whatcom County veterans.

The two veterans staff members at WCHCS have been able to complement each other's work and support veterans in new ways, such as presenting to elected officials to educate them on veterans' needs, providing clinics for Border Patrol staff who are military veterans, and meet people 'where they're at' in their workplaces. Both staff are veterans, which allows them to better connect and understand the services and agencies they work with on behalf of other veterans.

2023 By The Numbers:



Environmental Health

- Supported at least 830 individual water connections
- Increased access to sewage disposal for over 300 properties
- Tracked over 29,000 onsite sewage systems
- Trained 874 homeowners to maintain their onsite sewage system

Congratulations to our Partner, Sustainable Connections, on 1 Million Pounds in the Food Recovery Program

The WCHCS Solid Waste Program provides local nonprofit Sustainable Connections with \$30,000 annually to support the Food Recovery Program (FRP). This program aims to reduce food insecurity, divert edible items that would otherwise go into landfills, and address climate change by redistributing surplus, nutritious food from local businesses to neighbors experiencing hunger, rather than sending that food to the landfill.

The program started in 2019 and reached the one million pound mark in 2023. The FRP is also the umbrella program for the “Freedge”, a refrigerated food pantry located at the RE Store in Bellingham.

In their 2022-23 annual report, Sustainable Connections reported that:

- 16 new businesses were recruited to the FRP
- 10 new businesses were consulted in how to divert their inedible food to compost instead of landfills
- 3 local events were supported in diverting food and organics from the landfill.

For more information on the Food Recovery Program, visit <https://sustainableconnections.org/tag/foodrecoveryprogram/>



We held two free drop-off tire recycling events in 2023. We collected an estimated 12,500 tires across 755 loads - several thousand more than in past years. These events were made possible by funding from the Washington State Department of Ecology.



Care-A-Van Clinics Offer Free Vaccine Clinics to Underserved Communities

Care-a-Van Mobile Health Clinics are a partnership between WCHCS and the State Department of Health to increase access to health services in rural Whatcom County. Care-A-Van also partners with tribal nations, elder care facilities, and Western Washington University to offer free vaccines to people without health insurance.

In 2023 WCHCS and Care-A-Van co-hosted 13 vaccine clinics through this program, offering free vaccines for COVID-19, flu, Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, Tdap, Mpox, and routine childhood vaccines.

2023 By The Numbers:



Nurse Family Partnership

- 89 families served
- 25 babies born
- 750 home visits and 250 telehealth visits



2023 Naloxone Distribution

- 11,824 Naloxone doses distributed in Whatcom County

Leadership

Erika Lautenbach, Department Director
Dr. Amy Harley, Co-Health Officer
Dr. Greg Thompson, Co-Health Officer

Management

Ann Beck, Community Health & Human Services
Lynnette Bennett, Community & Organizational Development
Malora Christensen, Response Systems
Sabrina Houck, Financial Services
Shamika Brooks, Communicable Disease & Epidemiology
Sue Sullivan, Environmental Health

Advisory Groups

Public Health Advisory Board

- Sterling Chick, Chair
- Emily O'Connor, Vice Chair

Behavioral Health Advisory Committee

- Nicholas Evans, Chair

Child & Family Wellbeing Taskforce

- Christina Jackson, Co-Chair
- Ray Deck, Co-Chair

Developmental Disabilities Advisory Board

- Raegen Miller, Co-Chair
- Lindsay Foreman-Murray, Co-Chair

Food Systems Committee

- Riley Sweeney, Chair
- Margaret Gerard, Vice Chair

Solid Waste Advisory Committee

- Rodd Pemble, Chair
- Brandi Hutton, Co-Chair

Solid Waste Executive Committee

- Satpal Sidhu, Chair

Veterans Advisory Board

- Lynne Graham, Co-Chair
- Andrea Vance, Co-Chair

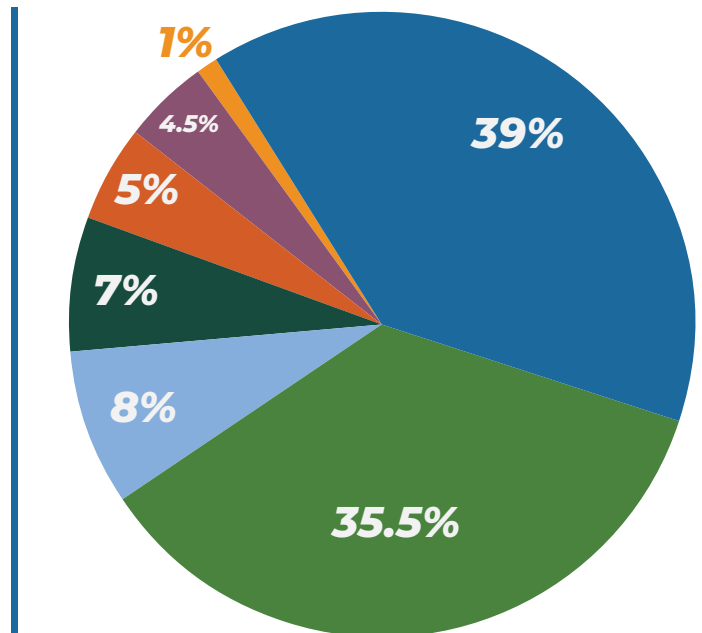
Whatcom County Housing Advisory Committee

- Dan Dunne, Chair
- Ashley Thomasson, Vice Chair

Healthy Whatcom (Community Health Improvement)

Financials

2023 Total Department Budget:
\$59,640,803



| | |
|--------------|--|
| 39% | \$23,059,447 Tax revenue |
| 35.5% | \$21,176,242 State funds |
| 8% | \$5,054,500 Fees, permits & services |
| 7% | \$4,069,216 Federal grants |
| 5% | \$2,990,409 County general fund |
| 4.5% | \$2,712,618 Other |
| 1% | \$578,371 Local funds (City of Bellingham) |

2023 By The Numbers:



Boards and Committees

- 139 individuals serving on WCHCS Advisory Boards & Committees

► What's Next

Way Station

Along with our partners, we look forward to opening the doors of the Way Station this fall. The Way Station, located at 1500 State Street in Bellingham, will offer respite beds for individuals exiting the hospital, hygiene services, medical and behavioral health care and connections, as well as case management and referral services. These services will be provided by PeaceHealth, Opportunity Council, and Unity Care NW. The second floor will co-locate Whatcom County EMS and WCHCS teams including syringe services, GRACE and LEAD.



Concept illustration of the State Street Way Station Facility.

Climate Vulnerability Assessment

Our Environmental Health division is conducting a Climate Vulnerability Assessment, with plans to release a final report in Summer 2024. The Climate Vulnerability Assessment, is specifically focused on extreme heat and wildfire smoke impacts on the health of residents of Whatcom County. The assessment will include stakeholder feedback, smoke/heat data analysis, and results of focus groups with frontline communities on needs and gaps.

Healthy Children's Fund

We expect to release a wide range of Requests for Proposals (RFPs) to identify service providers who will receive funding to support the two overarching goals of the Healthy Children's Fund, passed by voters in 2022: 1) Increase access and affordability of early learning and care and 2) Provide support for vulnerable children and families. Selected providers will make progress on these goals by increasing childcare slots, providing systems of support for families ranging from prenatal services to early intervention, as well as addressing developmental delays, housing concerns, and meeting basic needs to stabilize families.

Fentanyl response

In 2024, our department will dedicate significant resources to addressing the fentanyl crisis in our community, including utilization of opioid settlement funding to provide trainings and public education about fentanyl, identifying additional intervention and treatment options for people struggling with opioid use disorder, and continued coordination with partners to ensure the most effective delivery of existing and future services.



Public Health Nurse Sarah Best demonstrates how to administer Narcan on Overdose Awareness Day in August 2023.

2023 By The Numbers:



Financial and Administrative Services

- 8,060 Death Certificates issued (\$189,885 in revenue)
- 3,995 Birth Certificates issued (\$99,875 in revenue)
- Answered over 9,000 phone calls from the public in 2023.
- Processed 326 public records requests



WHATCOM COUNTY
**HEALTH AND
COMMUNITY
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www.whatcomcounty.us/Health

Front Cover Photo: Randy Rydel, Whatcom County Public Works Department

Rear Cover Photo: Vincent Alvarez, Whatcom County Information Technology Department

